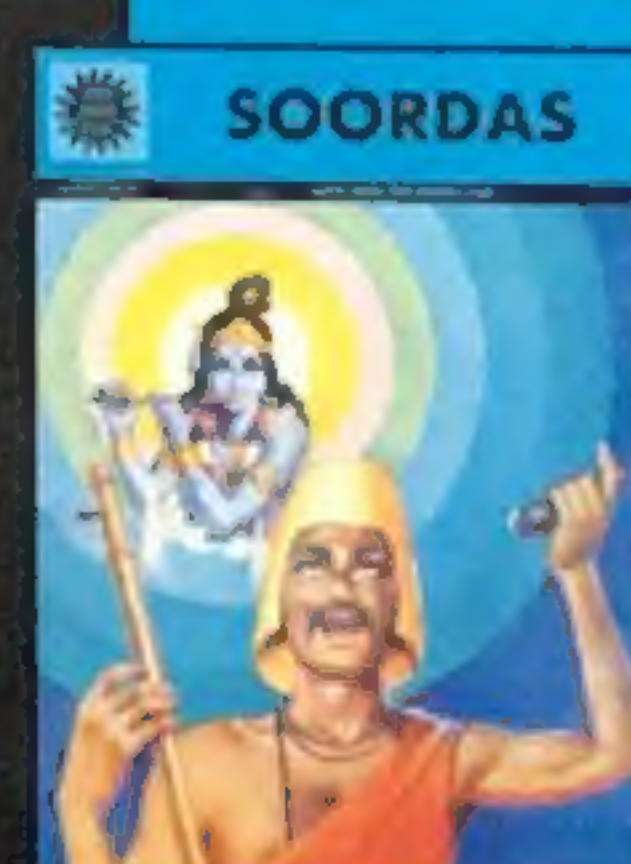
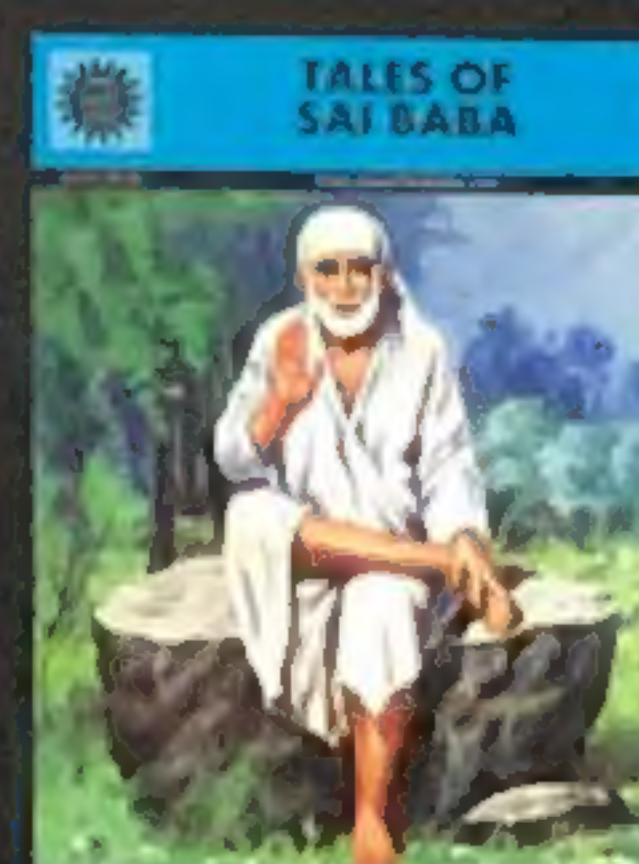
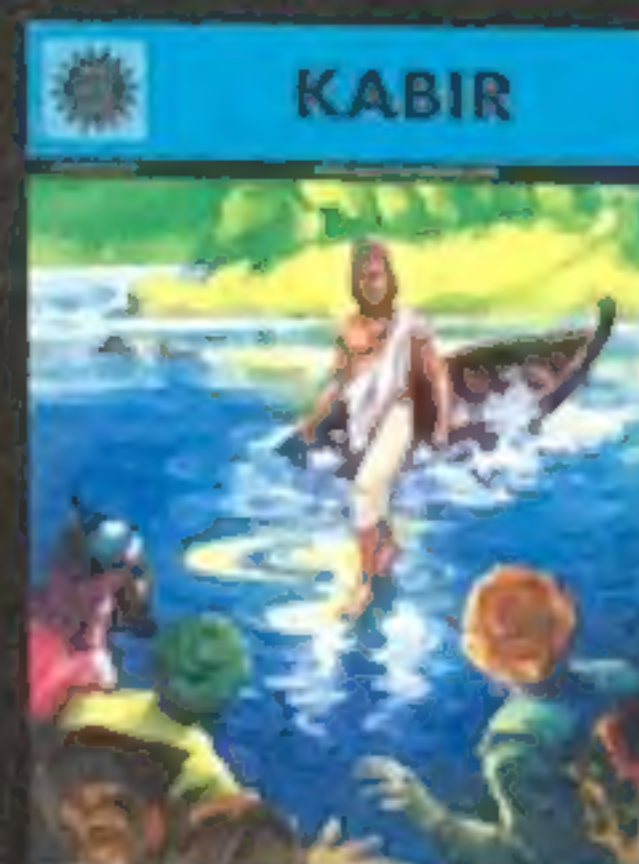


CHOKHA MELA

Chokha was a young boy when he first heard the call of the Lord. But all attempts to enter temples were thwarted by those who only saw him as a Mahar – an untouchable. However, Chokha's devotion was such that his heart became a temple, and he sang with purity and complete faith. Chokha Mela's Abhangs or verses echo to this day around the temples of Maharashtra.

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VISIONARIES



CHOKHA MELA

THE BOY WHO HEARD GOD

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CHOKHA MELA

...WHEN THE SLOW, STEADY CLANG OF TEMPLE BELLS RANG IN THE TWILIGHT HOUR.

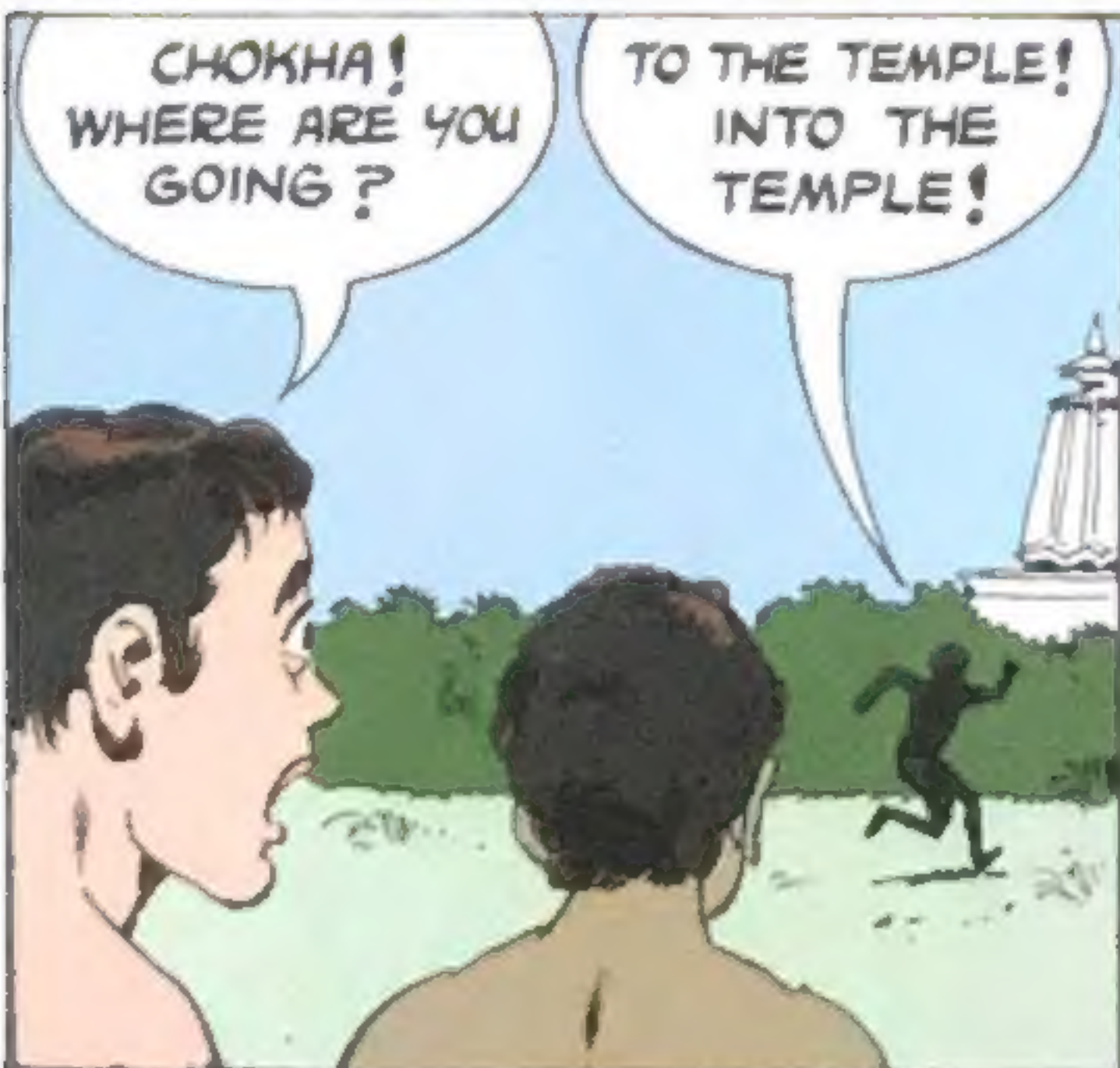


ONE EVENING, TOWARDS THE CLOSE OF THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY, A FEW MAHAR BOYS WERE PLAYING HUTUTU OUTSIDE THEIR HUTS AT MANGALVEDHE IN SOLAPUR DISTRICT...



AS THE CLANG OF THE BELLS BECAME LOUDER, CLEARER AND MORE INSISTENT, ONE OF THE BOYS SUDDENLY STOOD STILL AND LISTENED. "COME, CHOKHA, COME" THEY SEEMED TO CALL.

THE BELLS HAD CLANGED EVERY DAY AT THIS HOLY HOUR BUT NEVER HAD THEY SPOKEN TO HIM SO CLEARLY AND WITH SUCH INSISTENCE.



BUT CHOKHA WAS POSSESSED BY THE CALL OF THE BELLS. HE RAN ON.



AT THE TEMPLE THE ARATI WAS ABOUT TO BEGIN.



THE TEMPO OF THE CLANGING BELLS QUICKENED AND THEIR VOLUME ROSE TO A CRESCENDO.



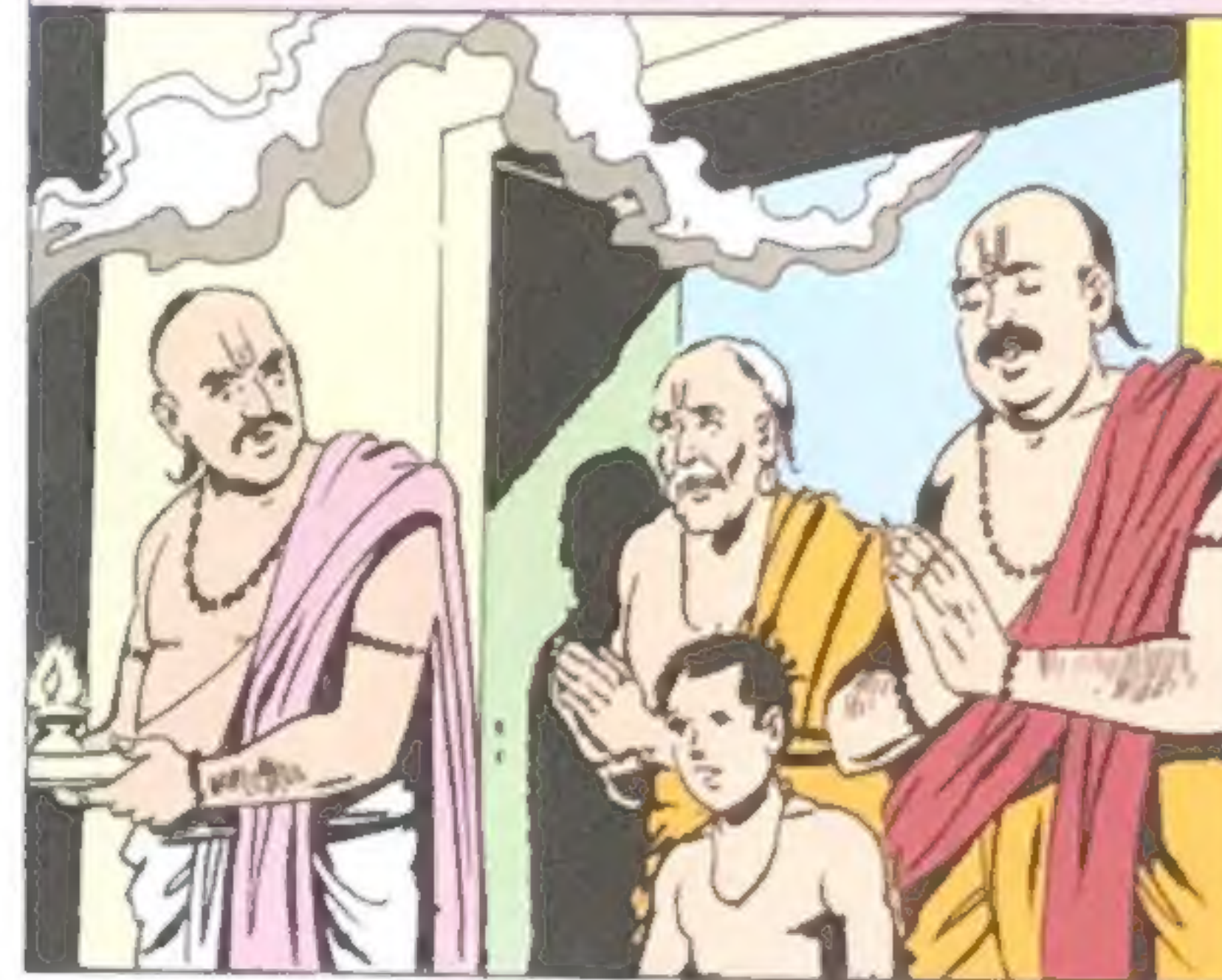
SOMETHING STIRRED IN THE VERY DEPTHS OF THE LITTLE BOY.



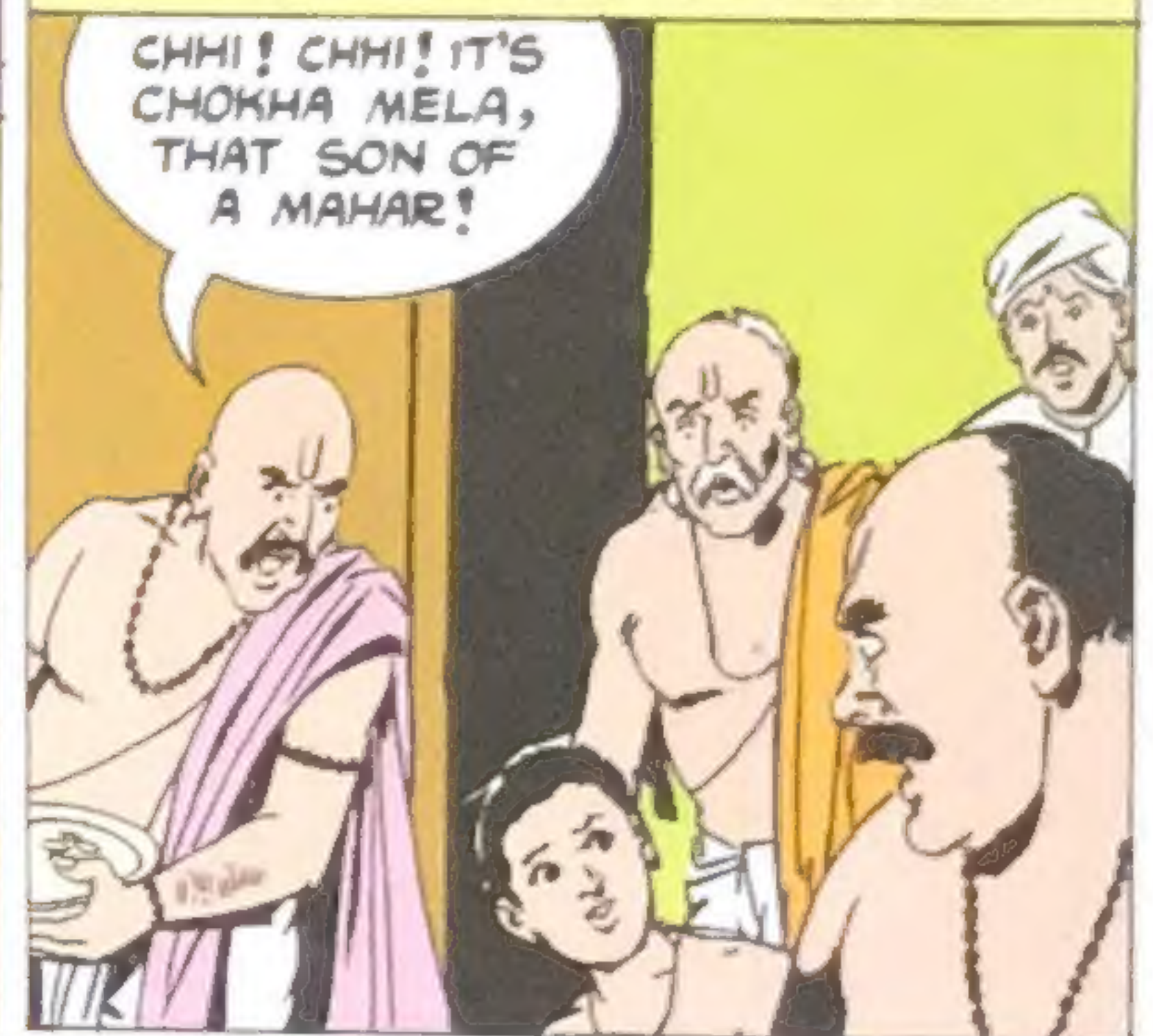
HE BEGAN TO PUSH HIS WAY THROUGH THE CROWDS. ABSORBED IN THEIR PRAYERS THE LESSER ONES HARDLY NOTICED HIM AND MECHANICALLY MADE WAY.



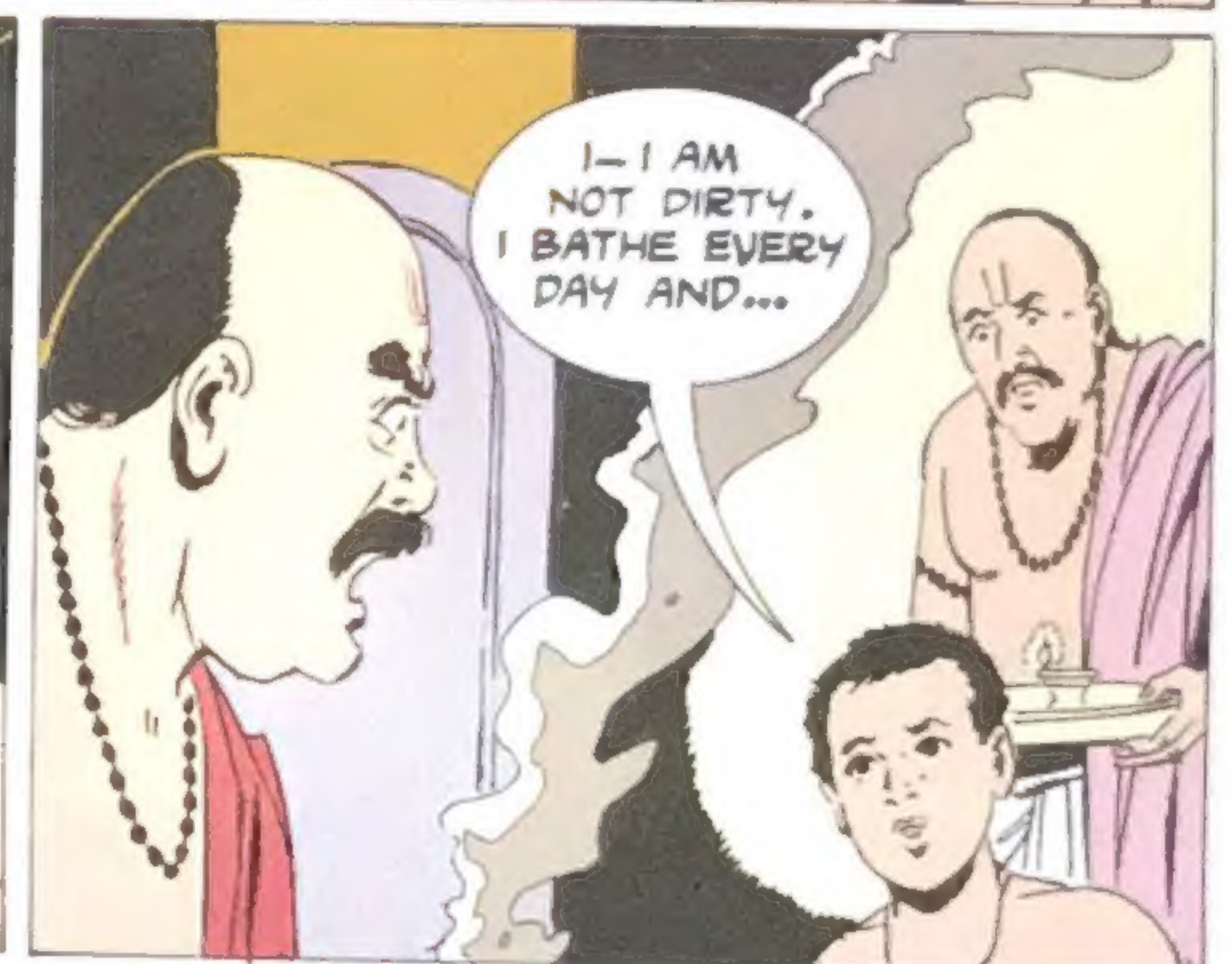
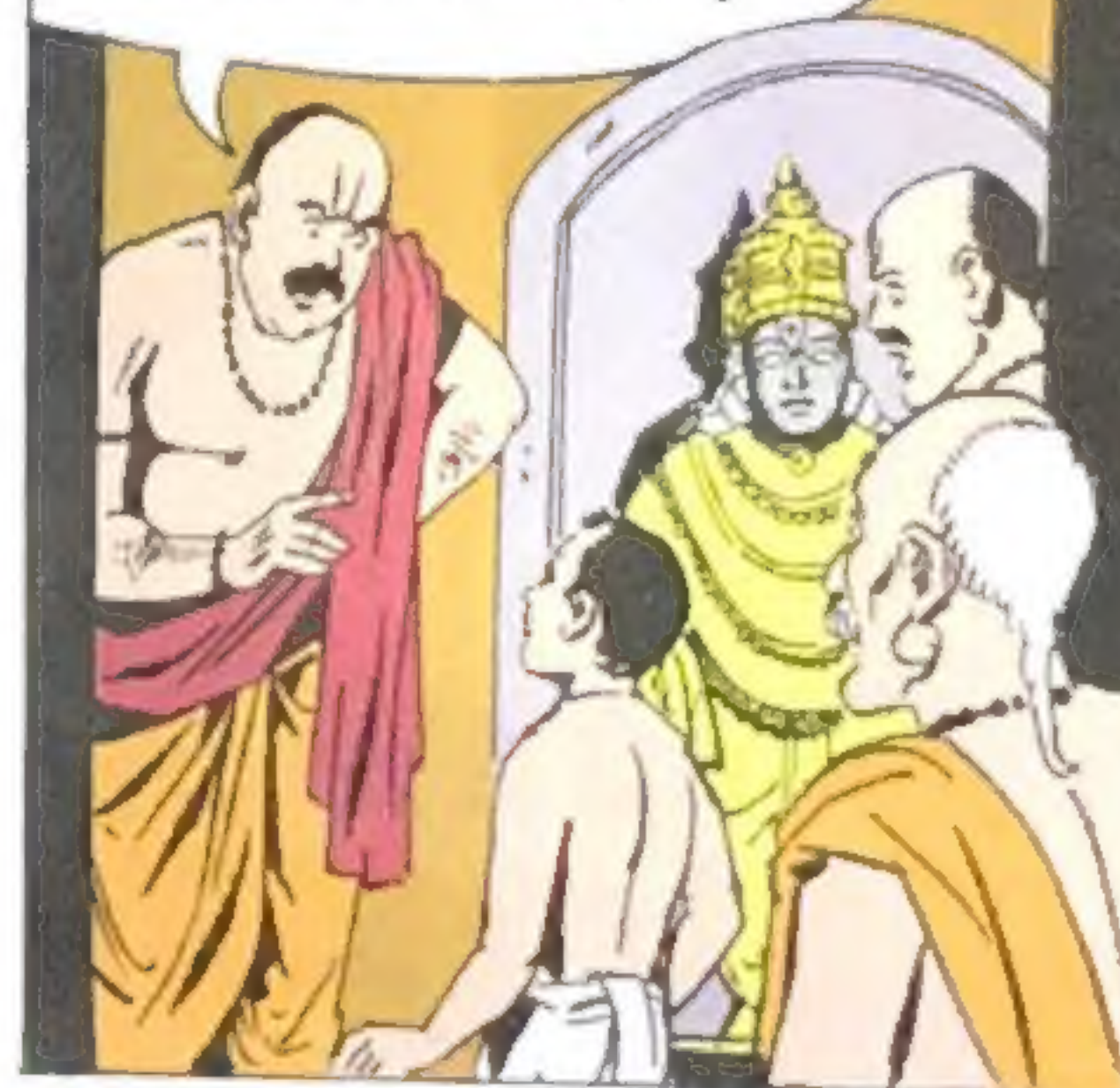
WHEN HE REACHED THE SANCTUM SANCTORUM THE UNDISPUTED PRESERVE OF THE HIGHEST CASTE AND CLASS...



...HE WAS SUDDENLY RECOGNISED.



HOW DARE YOU COME HERE! AND AT THIS AUSPICIOUS HOUR! GET OUT OF HERE, YOU DIRTY FELLOW!



...AND MY CLOTHES ARE WASHED EVERY DAY.

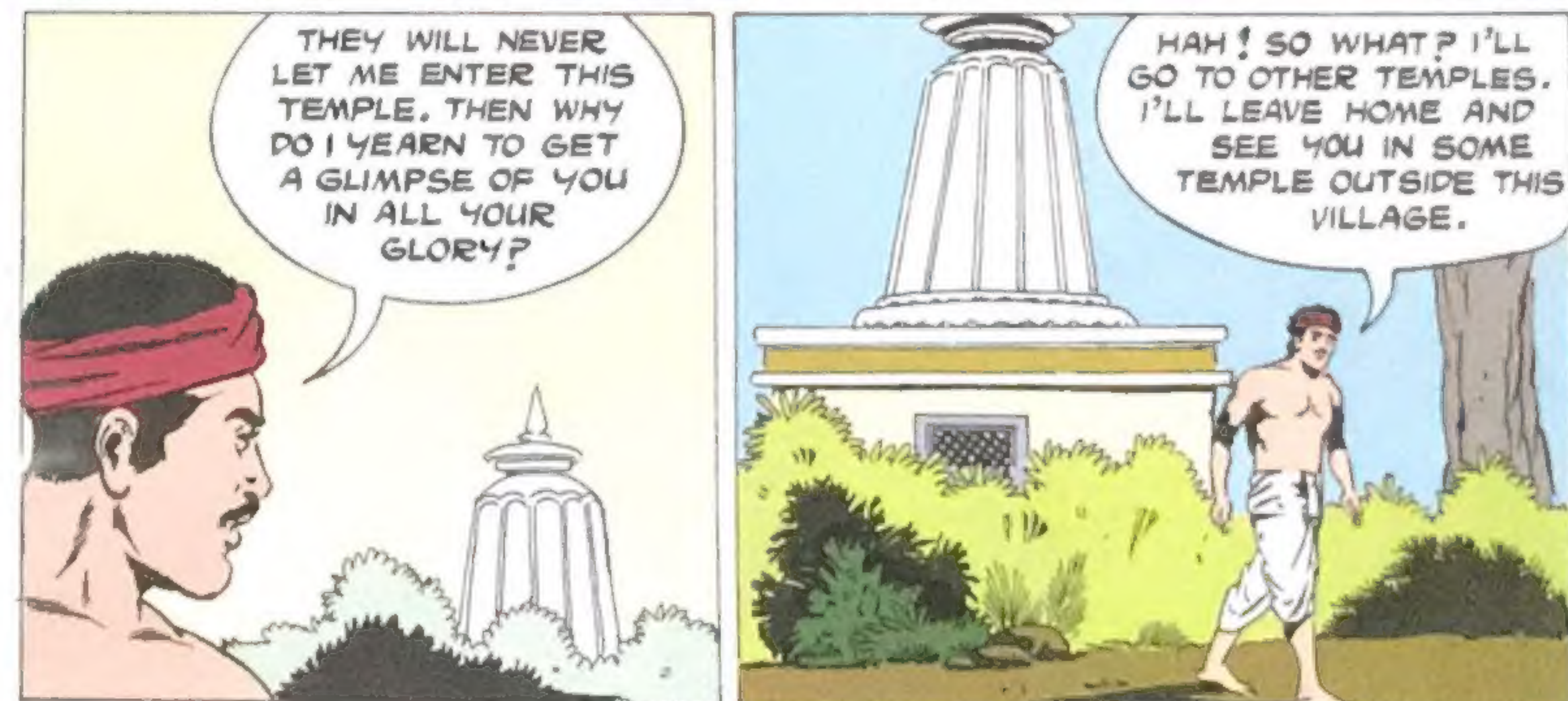
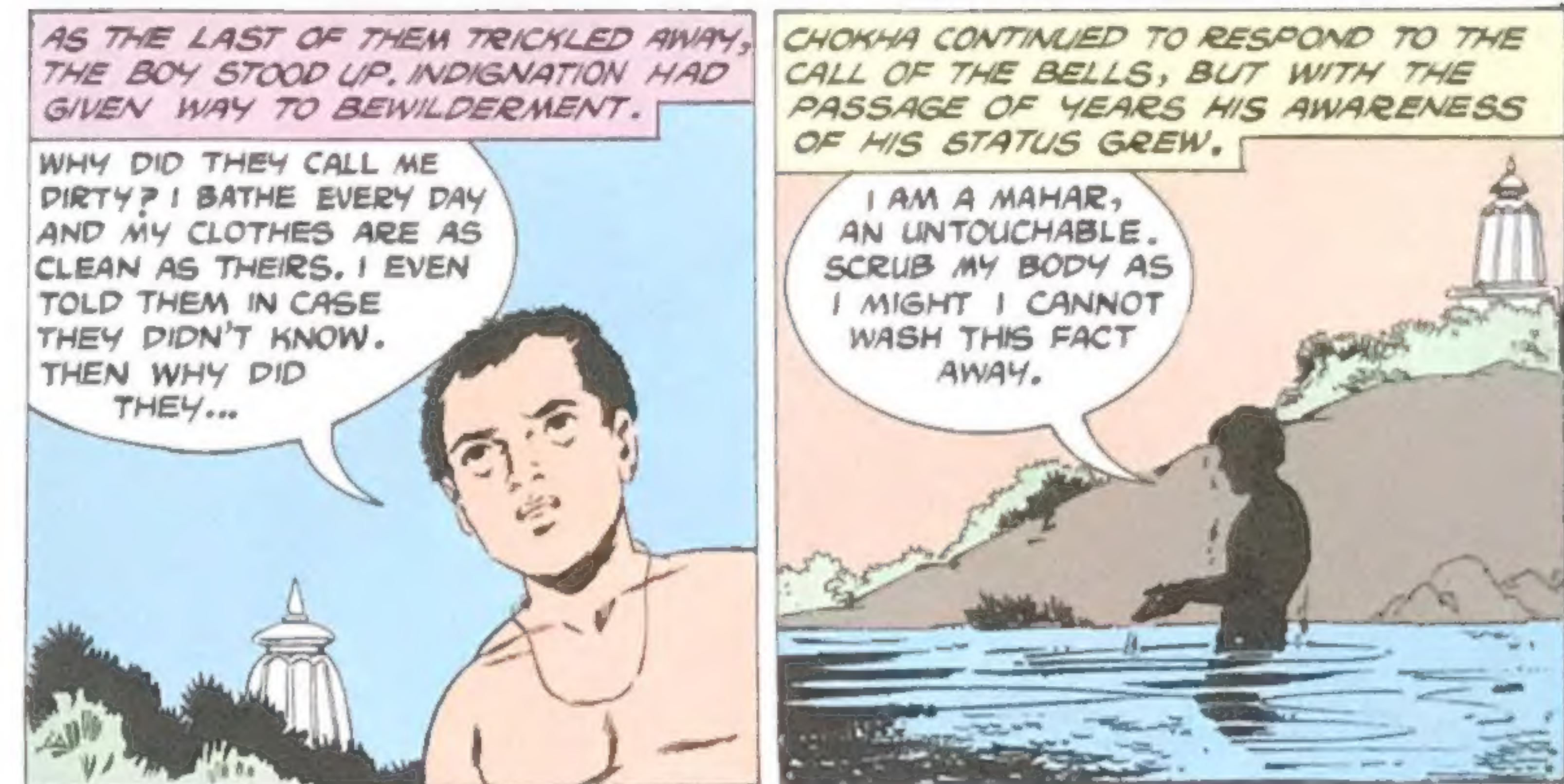
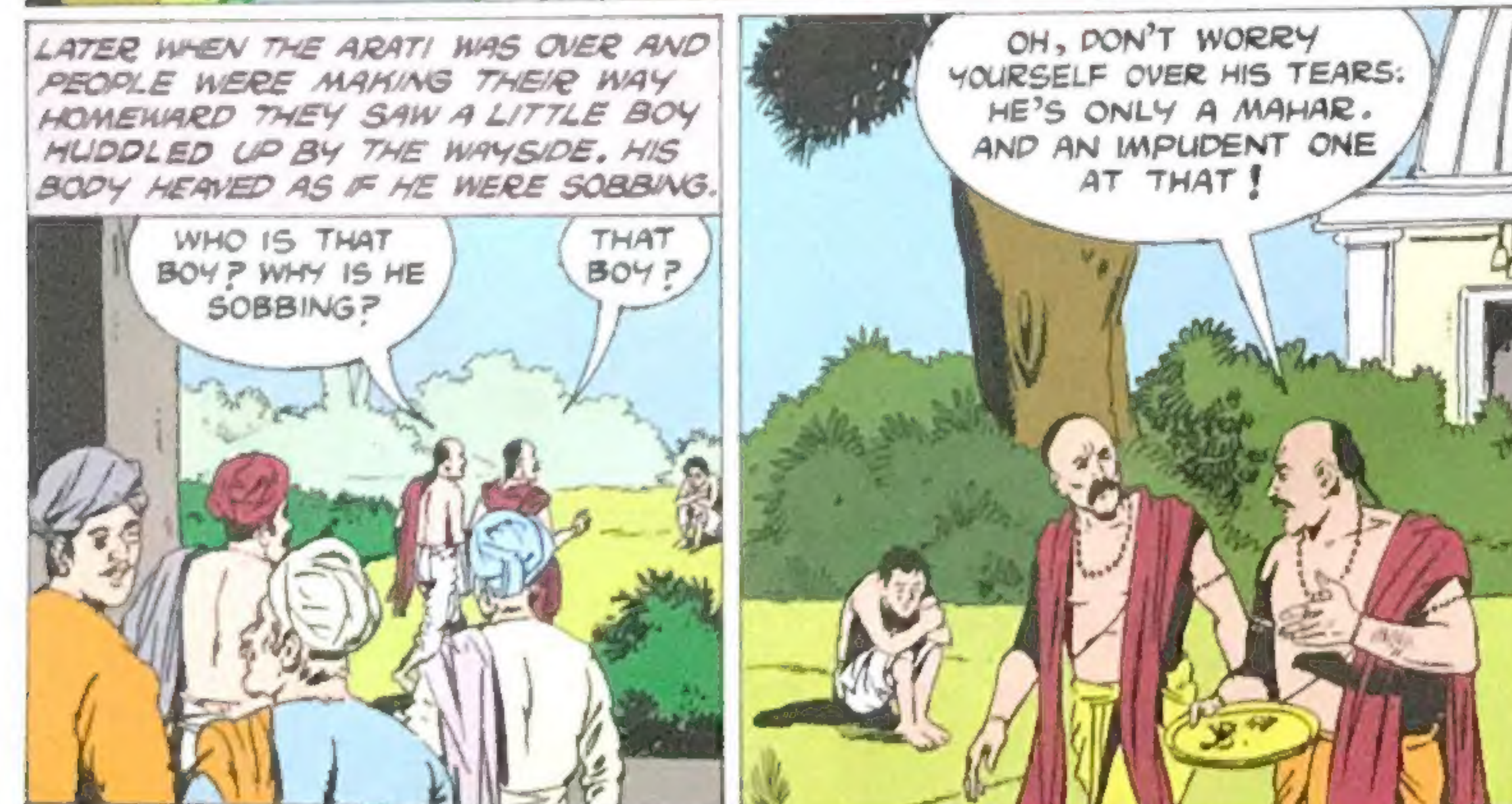
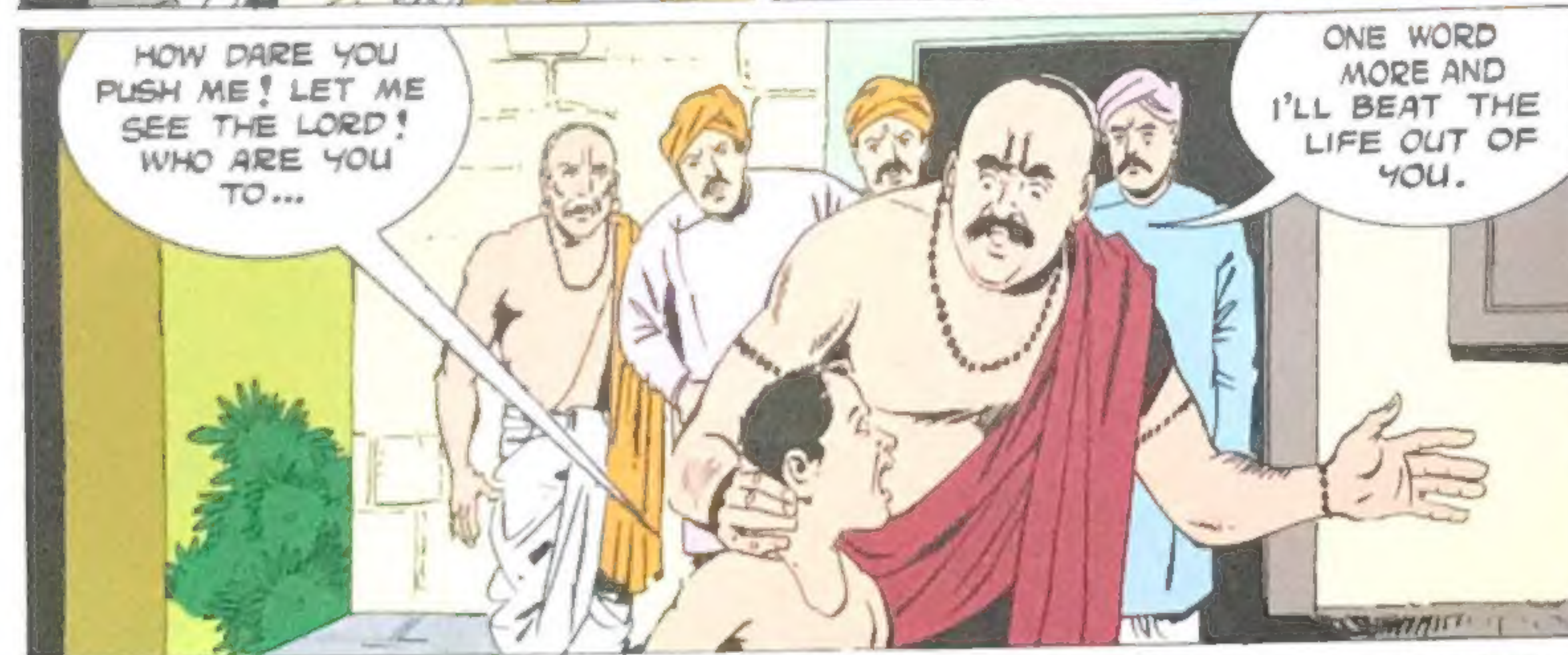
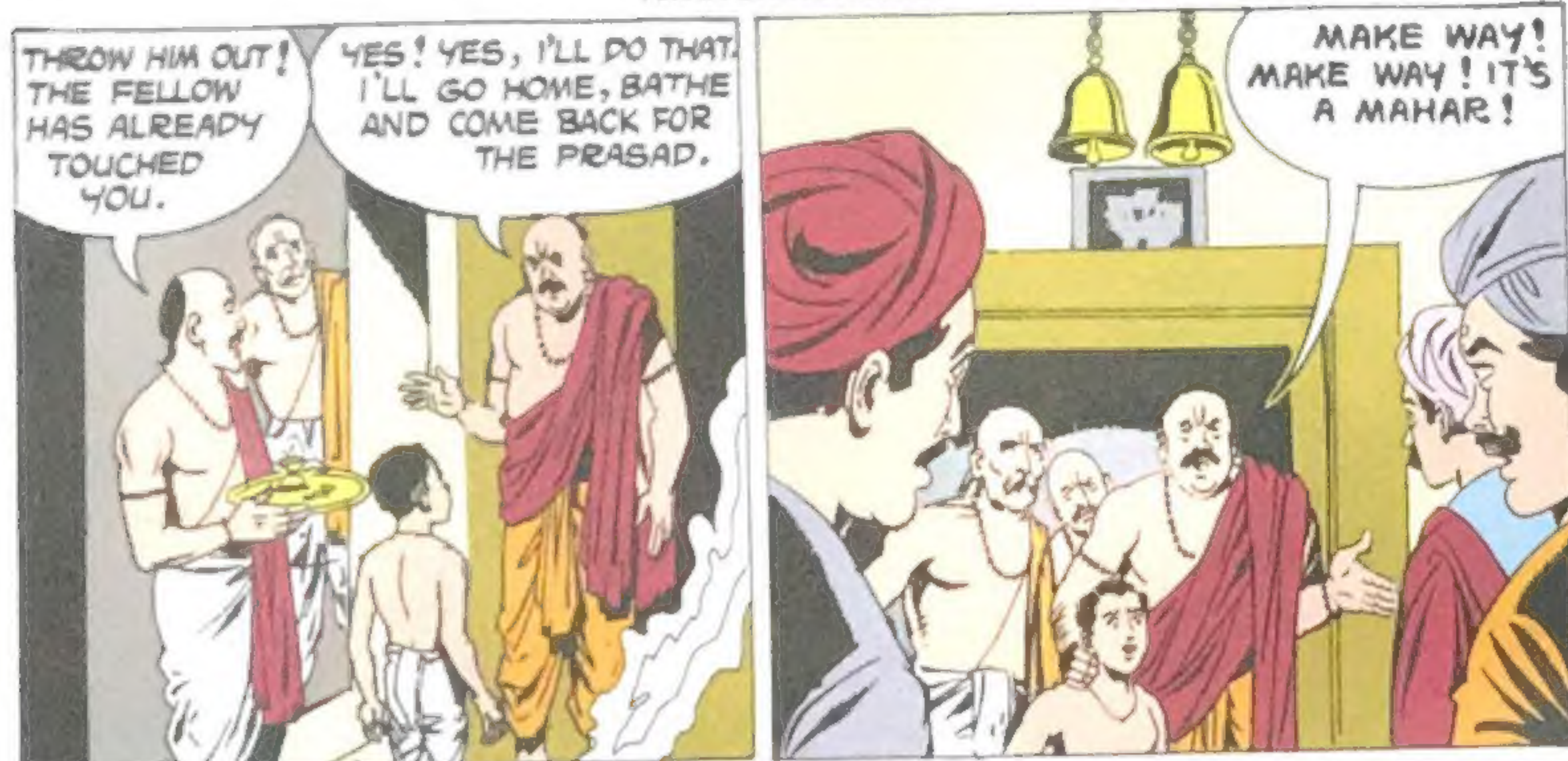


LOOK! THEY ARE CLEAN. I AM CLEAN!



NOT ANOTHER WORD FROM YOU, YOU INSOLENT WRETCH!





OUTSIDE THE FIRST TEMPLE
HE WENT TO —



PLEASE LET ME
PASS. I TOO WANT
TO GO IN AND SEE
THE LORD.

HEY!
AREN'T YOU
A MAHAR?



ER...
YES... BUT
I HAVE...

YOU
SCOUNDREL! HOW
DARE YOU TALK OF
PASSING BEYOND
THE MAIN
GATE!



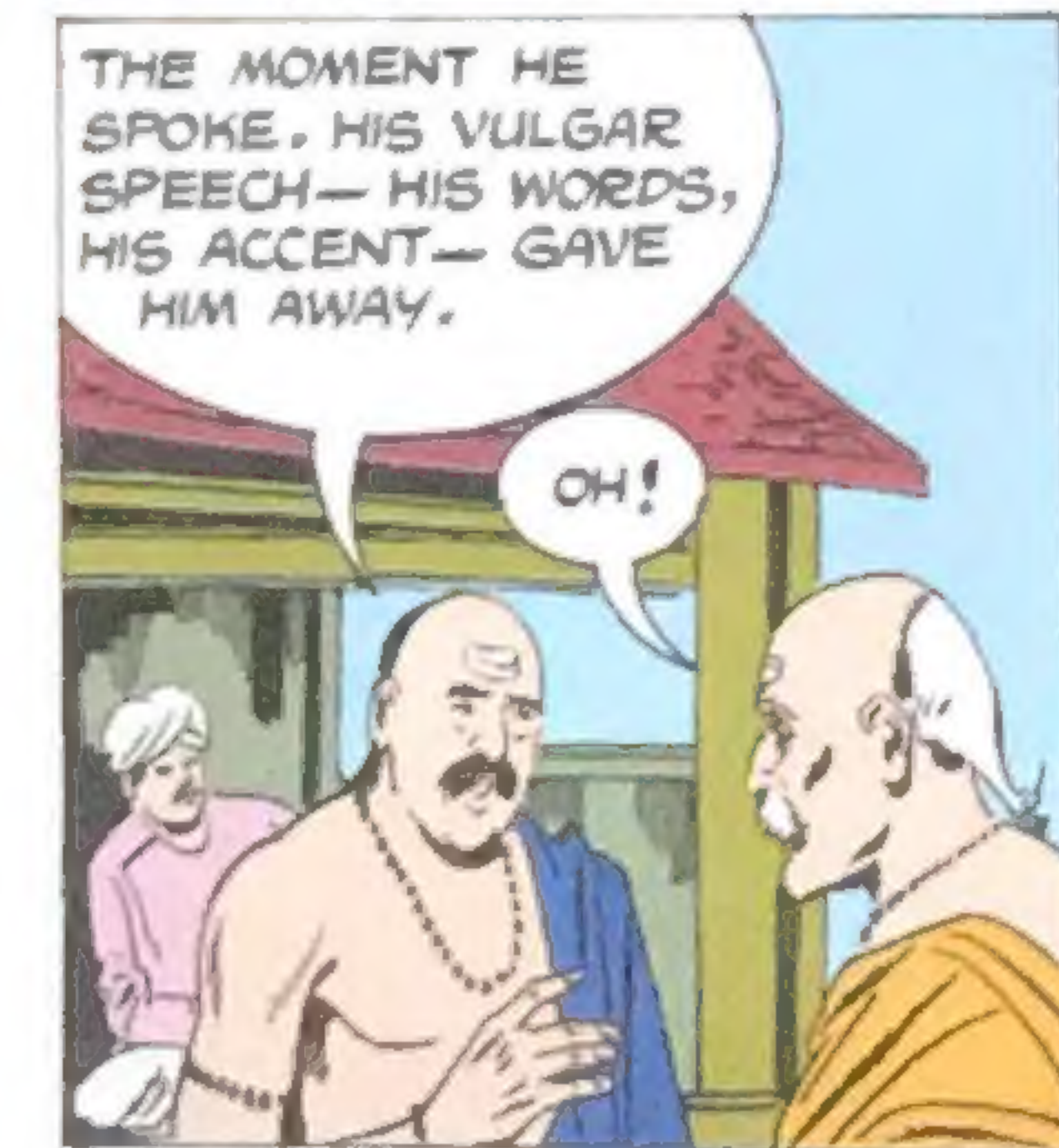
GET OUT BEFORE
I HAVE YOU
BEATEN UP!

WHAT'S THE
MATTER?



THAT LOU OF A MAHAR
WAS TRYING TO SLIP
PAST THE MAIN GATE
INTO THE TEMPLE!

REALLY?
HOW DID YOU
FIND HIM
OUT?



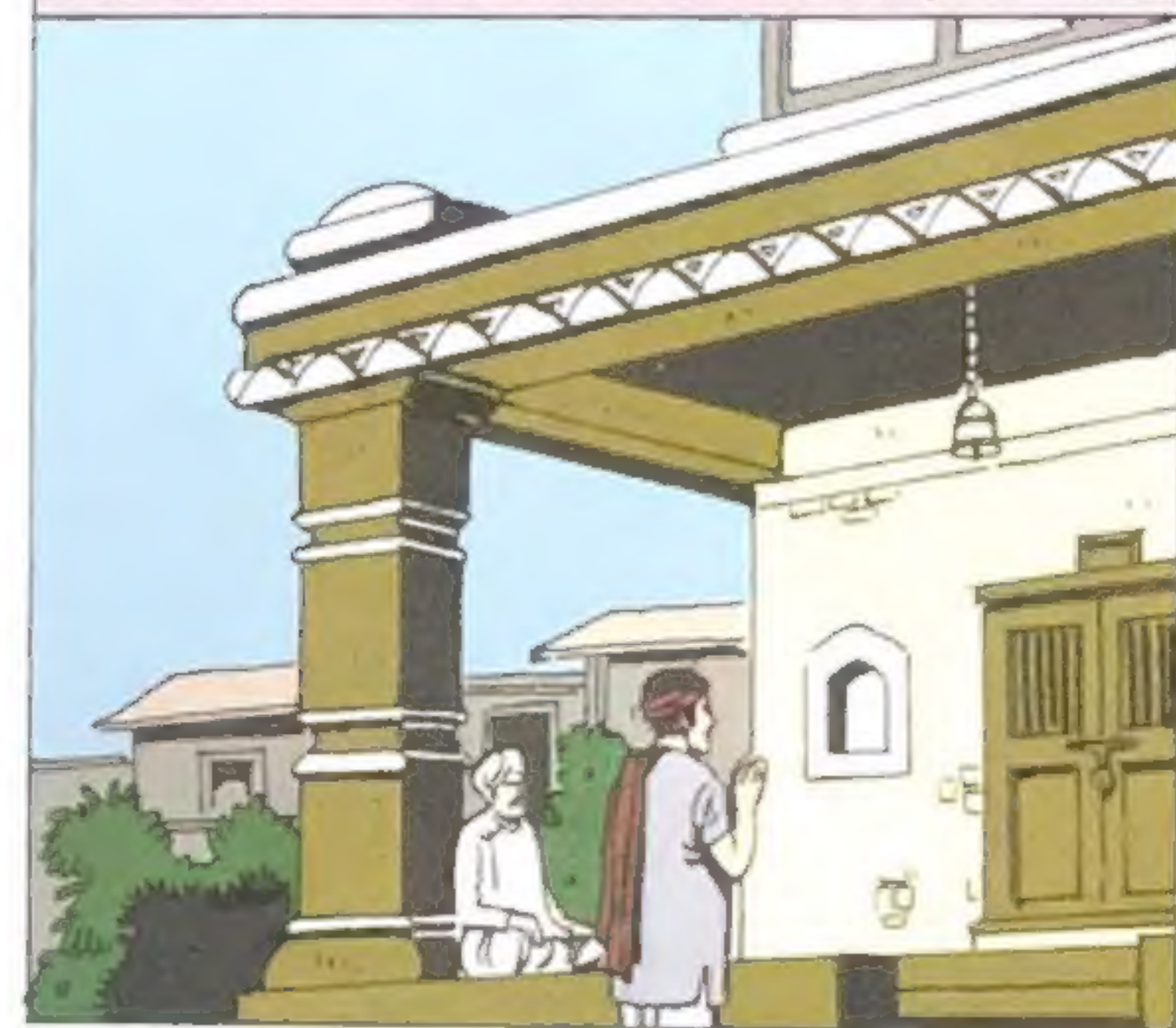
THE MOMENT HE
SPOKE. HIS VULGAR
SPEECH— HIS WORDS,
HIS ACCENT— GAVE
HIM AWAY.

OH!



NEVER MIND.
I WILL SEEK YOU IN
ANOTHER VILLAGE,
IN ANOTHER
TEMPLE.

BUT EVERYWHERE IT WAS THE SAME. HE
WAS NOT ALLOWED ENTRY INTO ANY TEMPLE.



ONE DAY, OVERCOME BY DESPAIR, HE SAT
UNDER A TREE IN A VILLAGE.



YOU SEEM TO BE
A STRANGER IN
THESE PARTS, MY
GOOD MAN.

I AM.
I COME FROM
MANGALVEDHE.

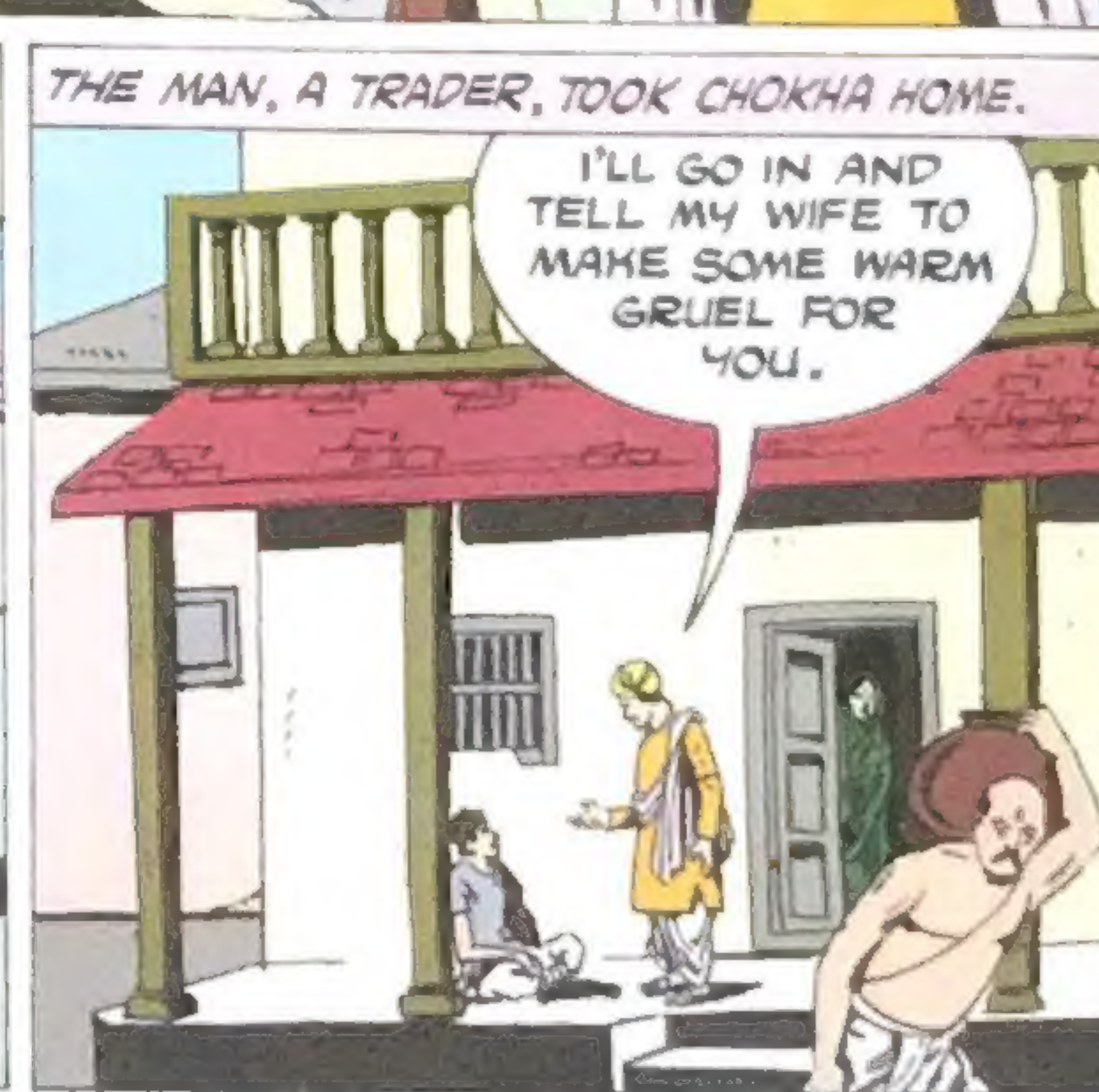


OH! HAVE YOU
HAD ANYTHING TO
EAT? OBVIOUSLY
NOT. YOU LOOK
WEAK AND
TIRED.



CHOKHA WAS STUNNED. HE HAD NOT
KNOWN SUCH KINDNESS BEFORE. HE
COULD NOT SAY A WORD. HE COULD
NOT MOVE.

YOU SEEM TOO WEAK
EVEN TO SPEAK. COME.
LET ME HELP YOU.



THE MAN, A TRADER, TOOK CHOKHA HOME.

I'LL GO IN AND
TELL MY WIFE TO
MAKE SOME WARM
GRUEL FOR
YOU.



THEN ONE DAY A GROUP OF VARHARIS* PASSED BY HIS VILLAGE SINGING THE GLORY OF LORD VITHOBA AND PANDHARPUR.



THE FERVOUR OF THEIR SONG AND THE INTENSITY OF THEIR DEVOTION CAST A SPELL ON HIM.



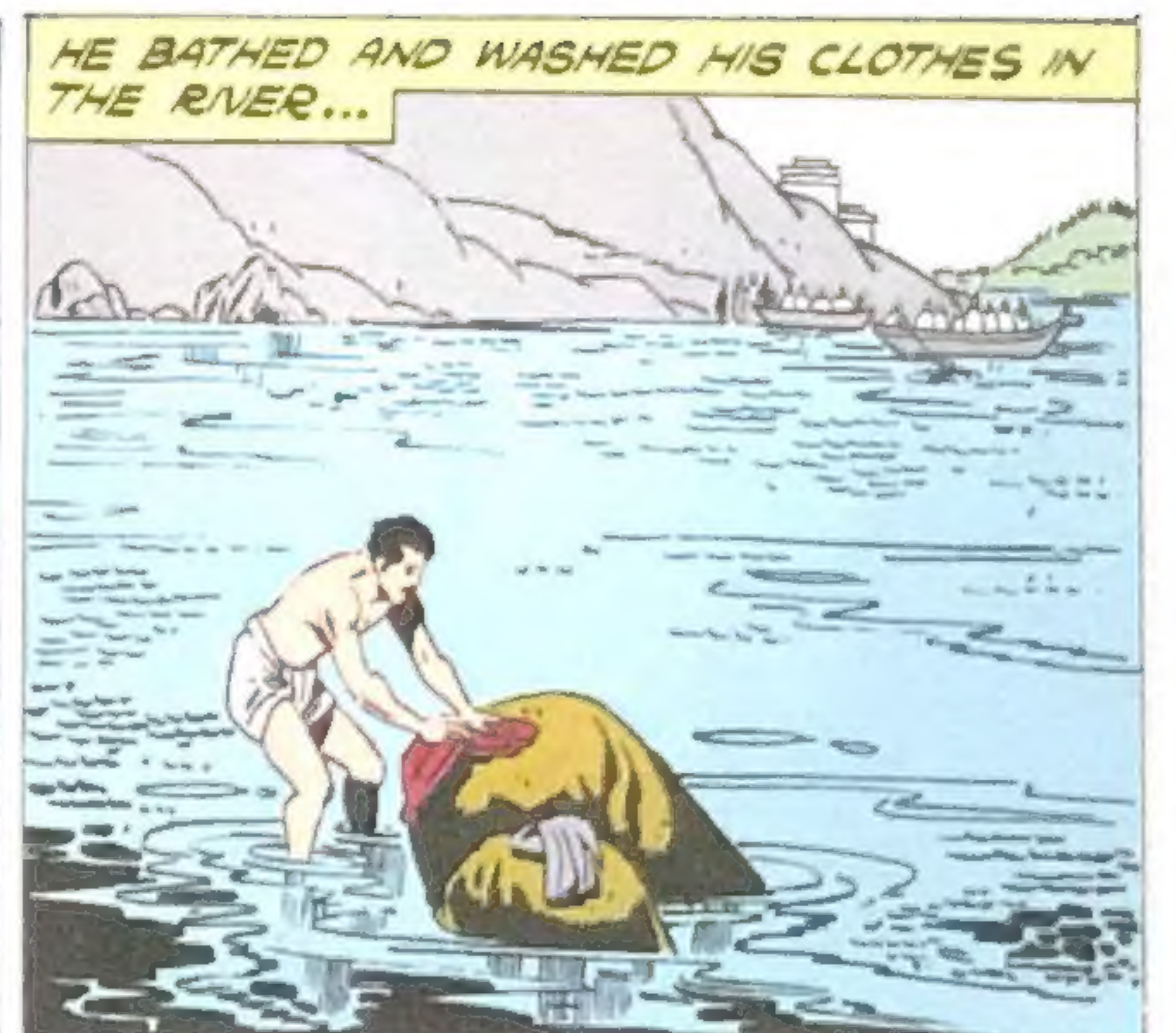
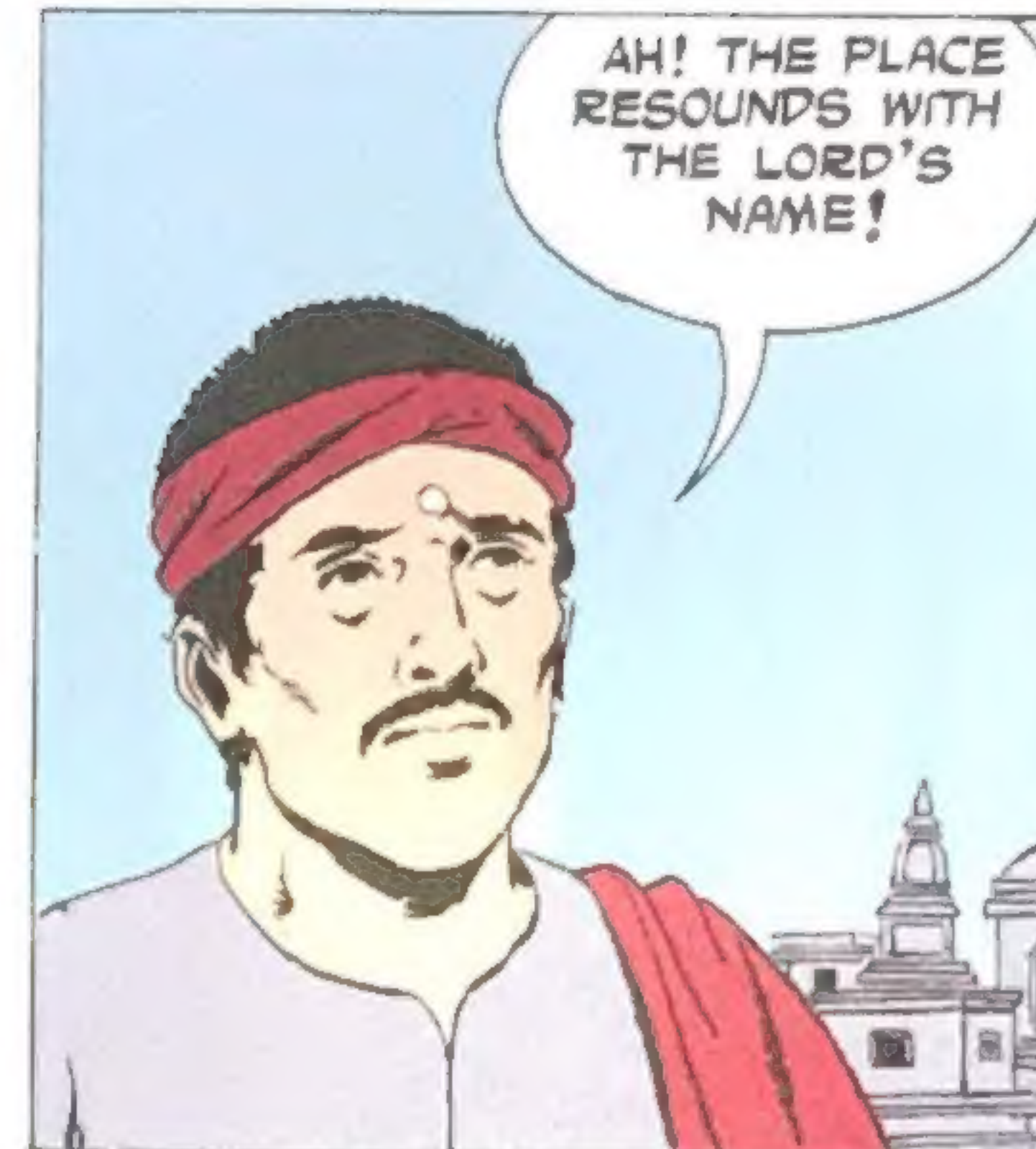
AS ONE IN A TRANCE HE FOLLOWED THEM.



AFTER DAYS OF TRAVELLING THEY REACHED PANDHARPUR.



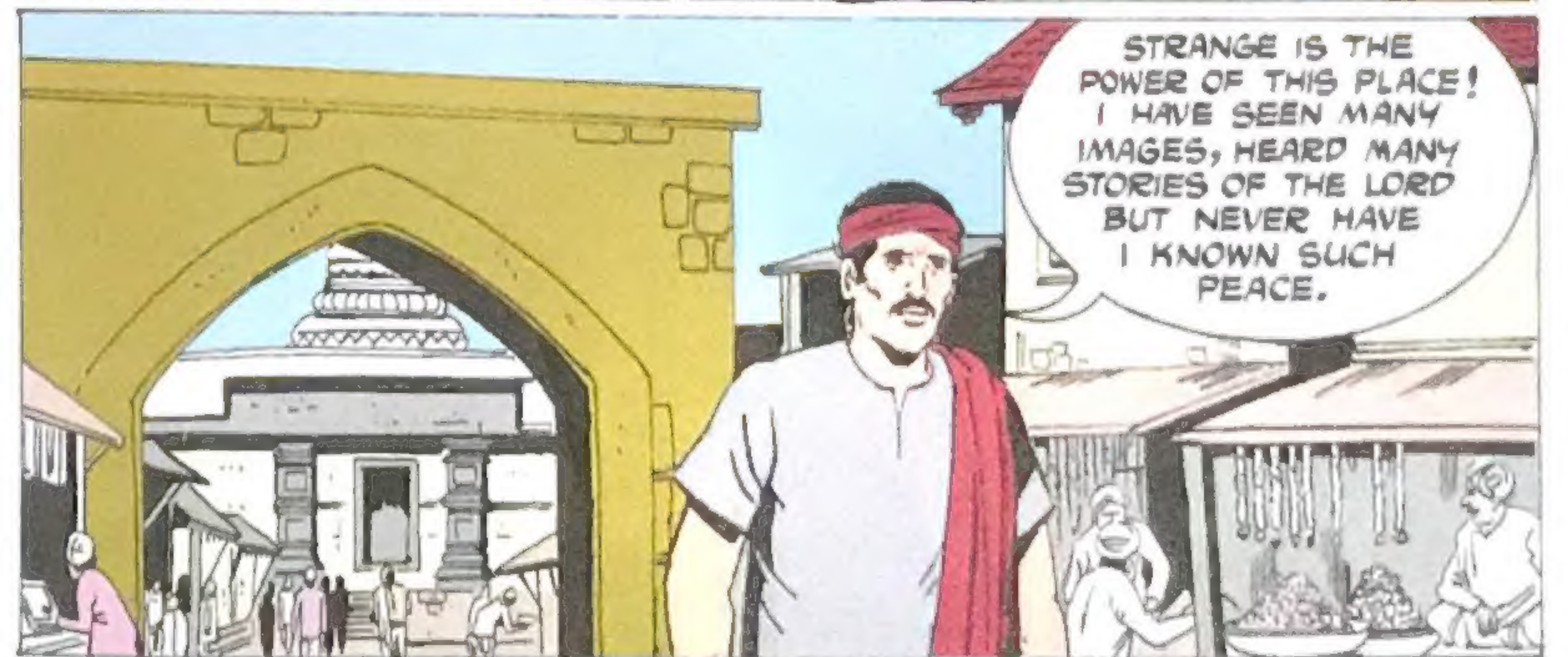
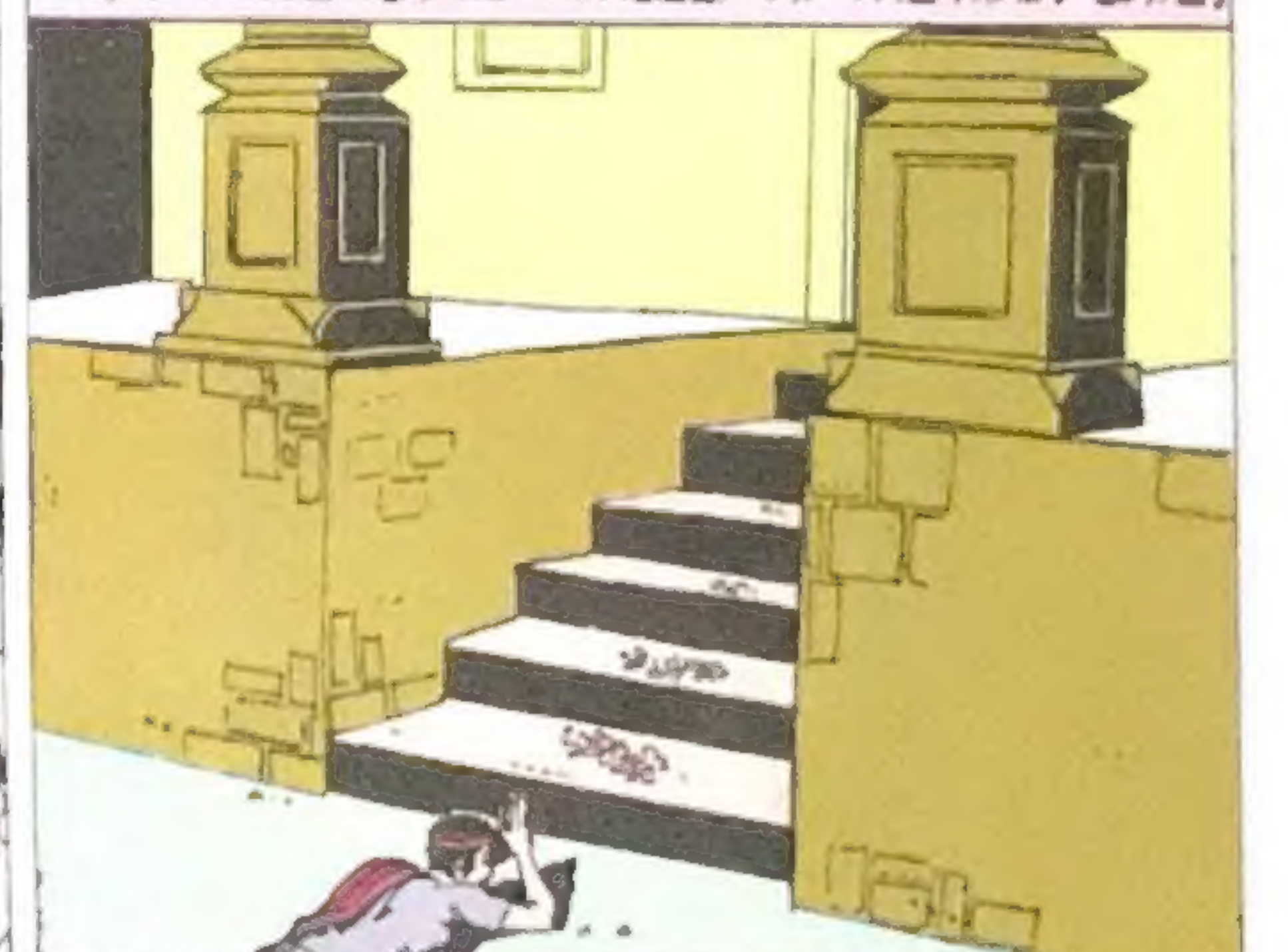
* A VAISHNAVA SECT, WHOSE MEMBERS MAKE REGULAR PILGRIMAGES TO PANDHARPUR



...CIRCUMAMBULATED THE TEMPLE...



...AND PROSTRATED HIMSELF AT THE MAIN GATE.



HE WANDERED BACK TO THE BANK OF THE RIVER.

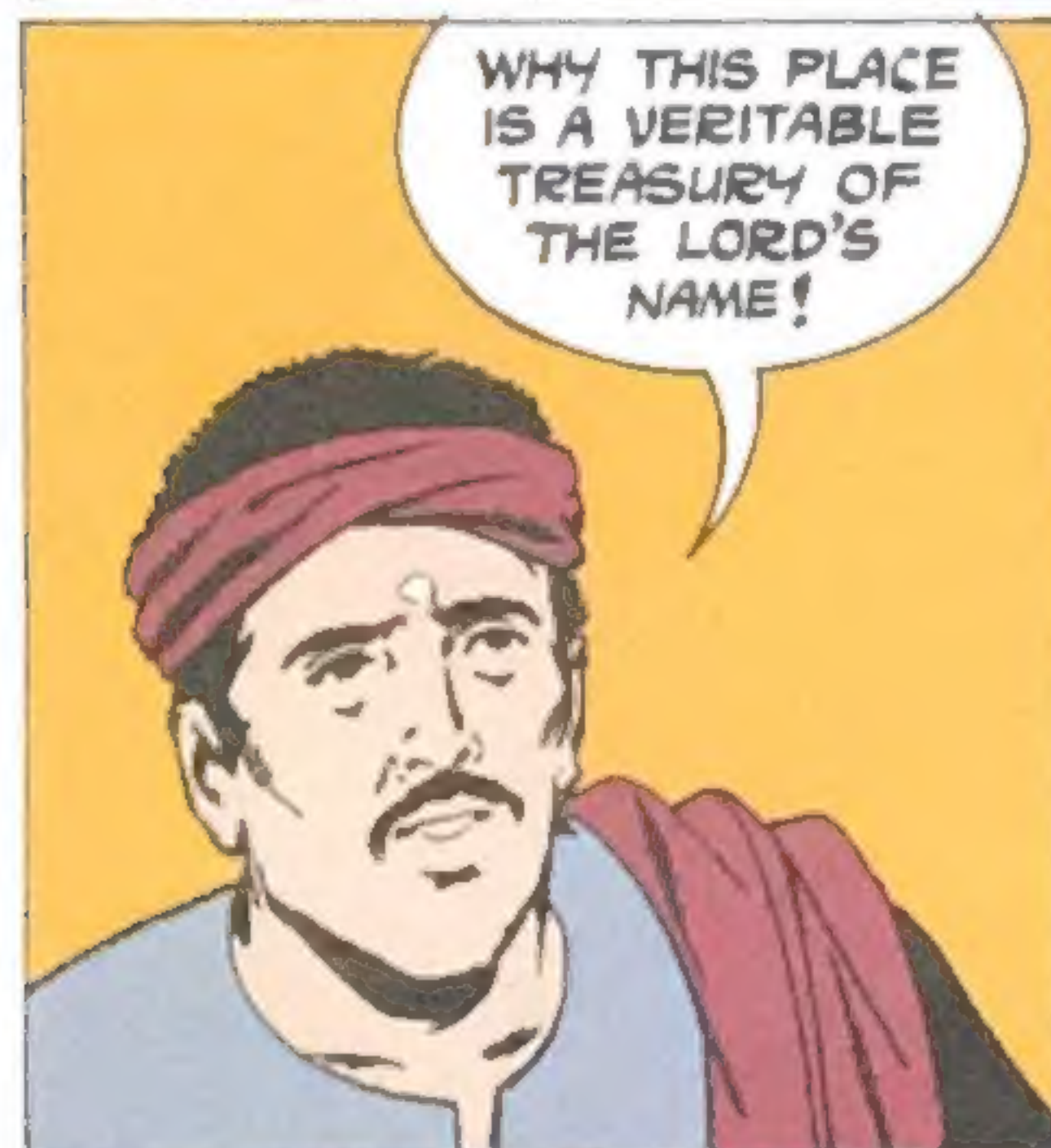


VITHALA! VITHALA!
VITHALA!

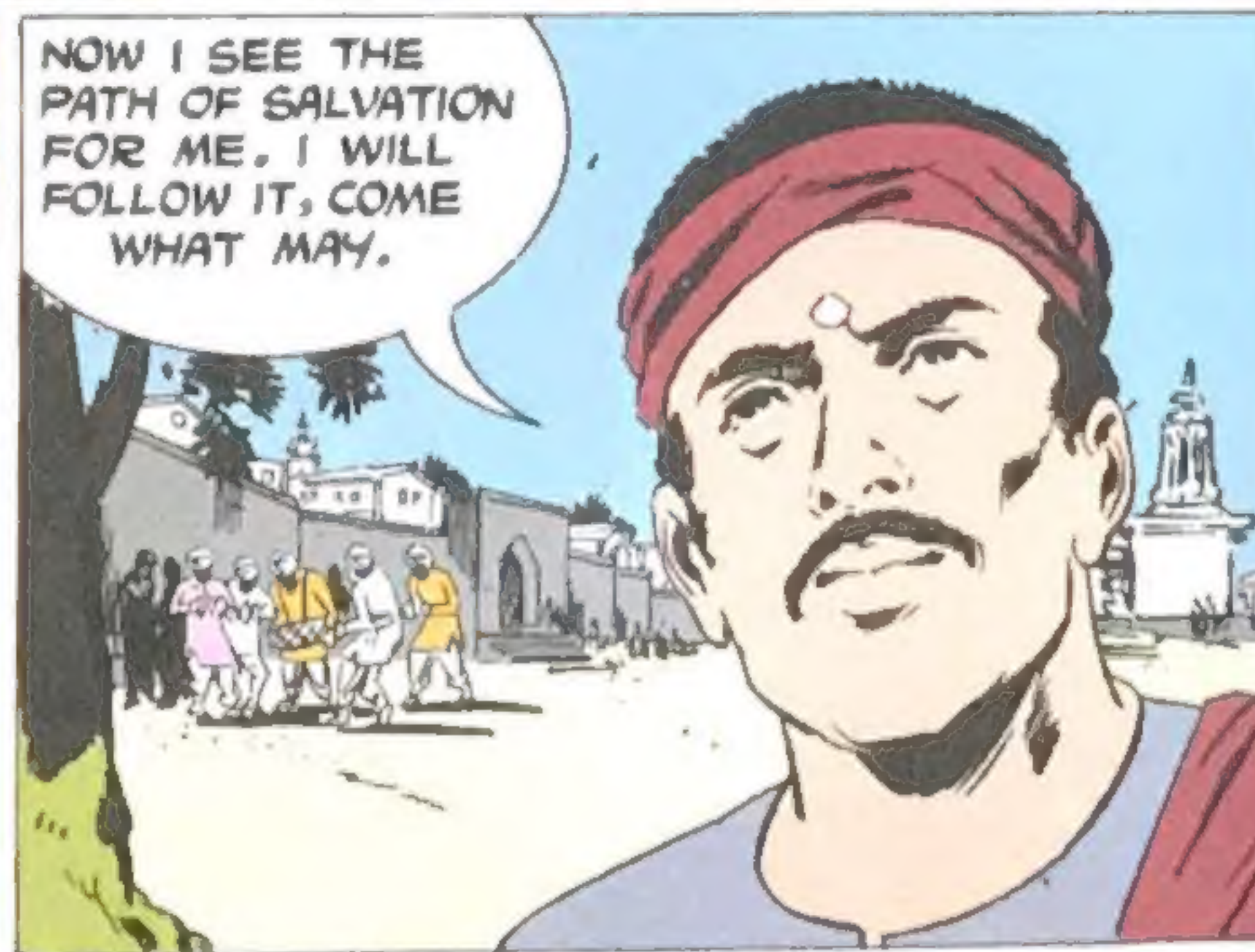


VITHALA!

VITHALA!



WHY THIS PLACE
IS A VERITABLE
TREASURY OF
THE LORD'S
NAME!



NOW I SEE THE
PATH OF SALVATION
FOR ME. I WILL
FOLLOW IT, COME
WHAT MAY.



VITHALA!
VITHALA! VITHALA!
VITHALA!

TOWARDS EVENING THE TEMPLE BELLS
BEGAN TO RING.



CLANG

VITHALA!

CHOKHA WALKED UP TO THE MAIN GATE.
OF THE TEMPLE.



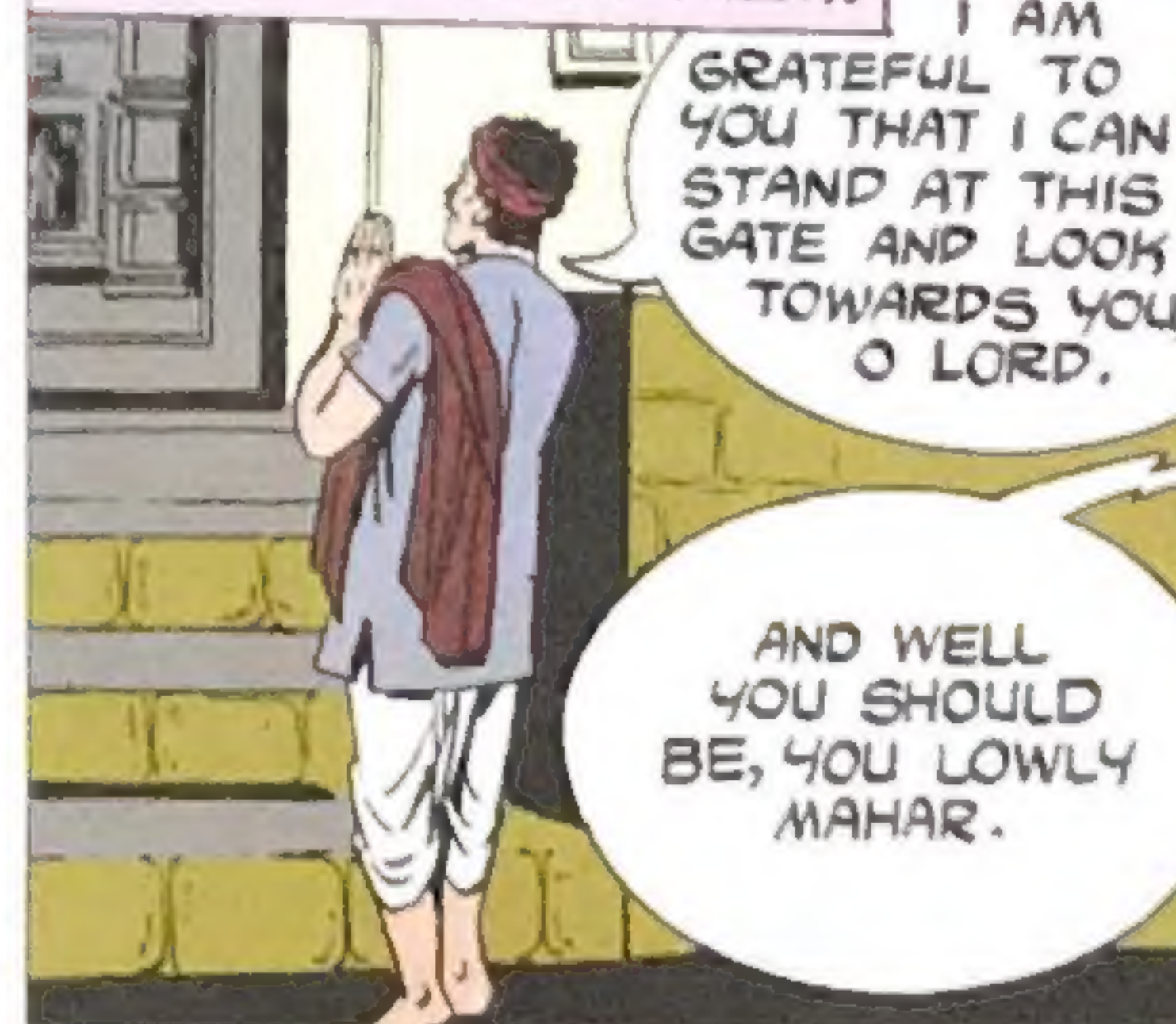
CLANG

AS THE BELLS RANG FASTER AND LOUDER,
HE CLOSED HIS EYES.



CLANG

ONLY LONG AFTER THE ARATI WAS
OVER DID HE OPEN THEM.

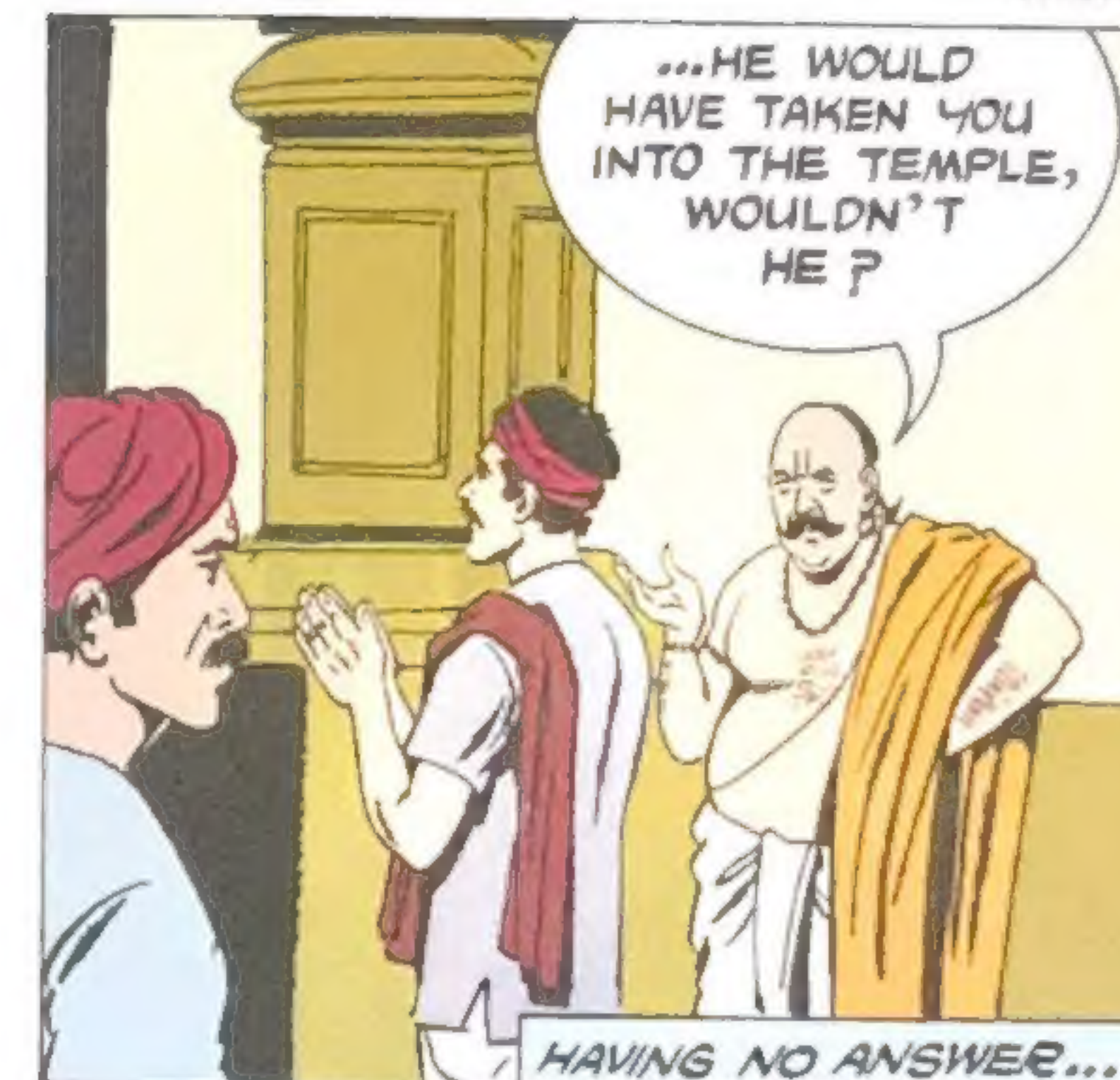
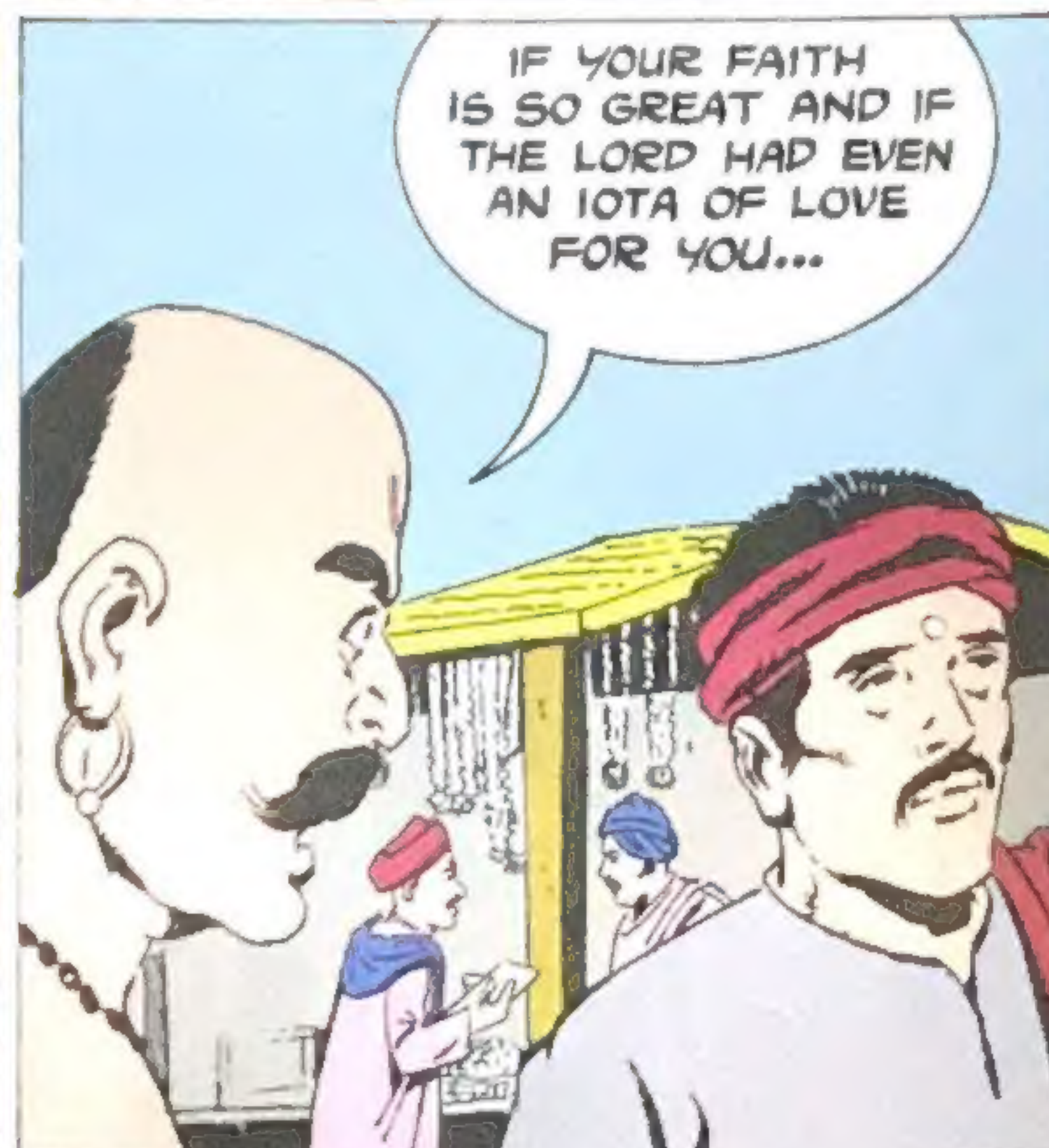
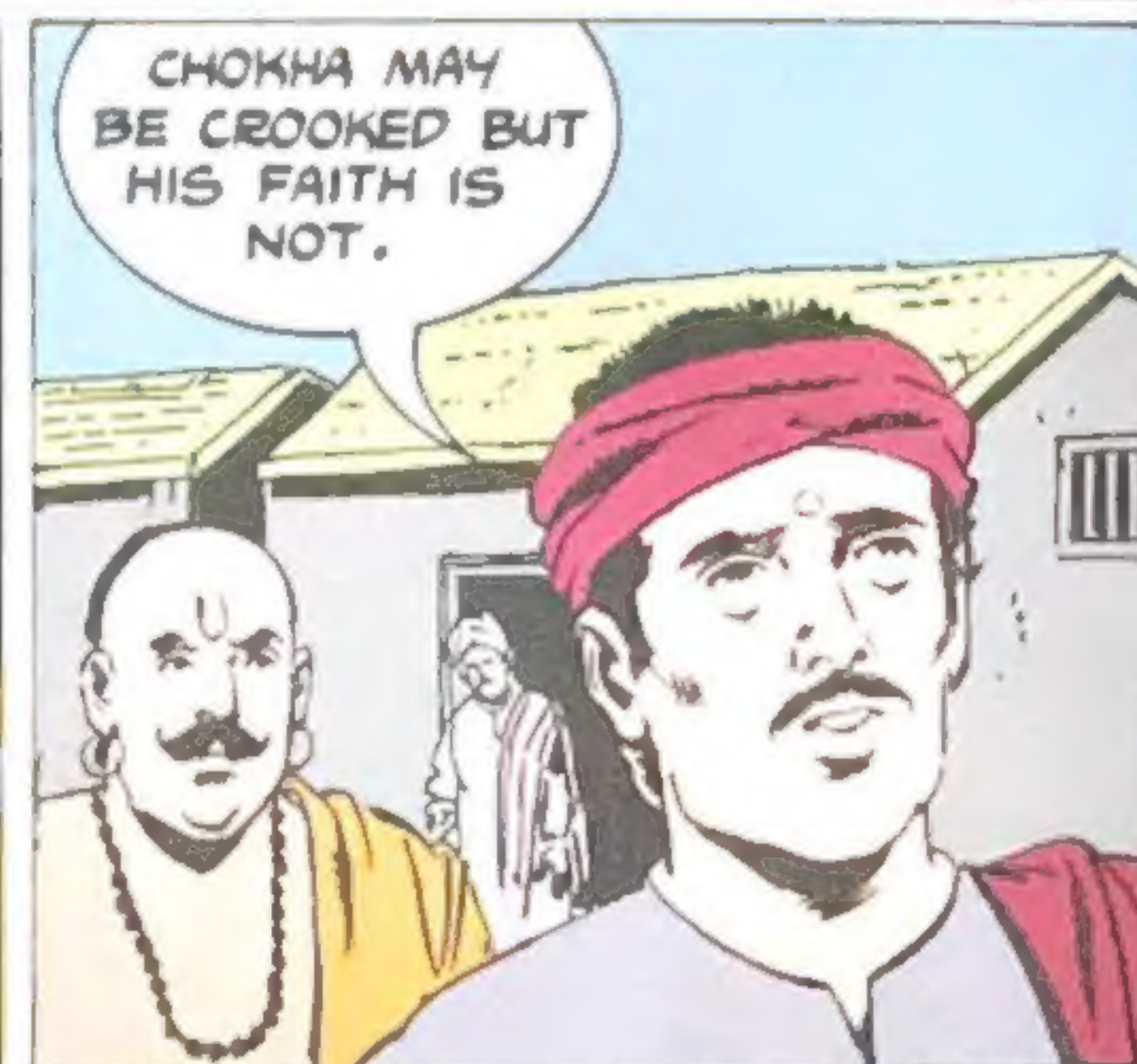
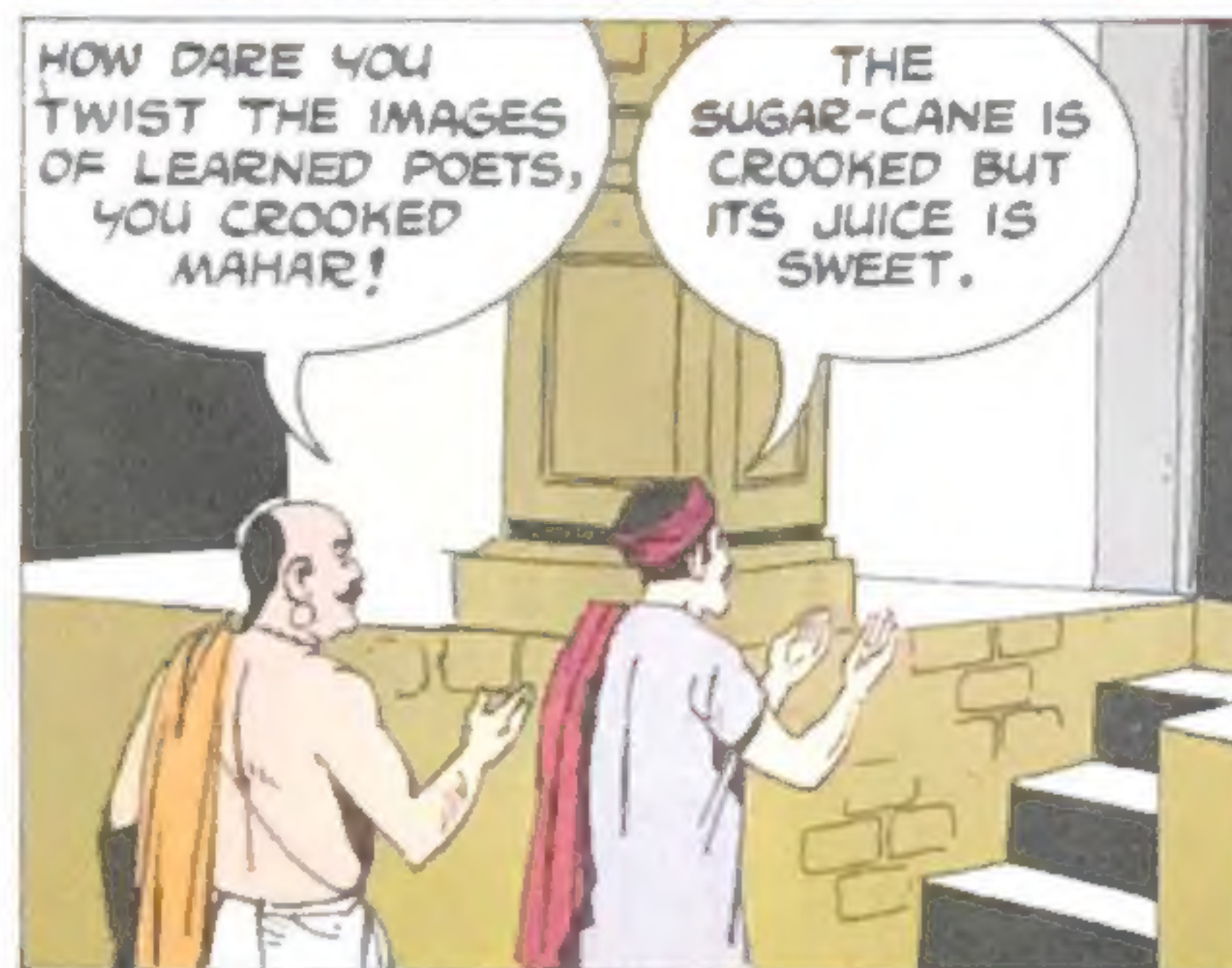


I AM
GRATEFUL TO
YOU THAT I CAN
STAND AT THIS
GATE AND LOOK
TOWARDS YOU,
O LORD.

AND WELL
YOU SHOULD
BE, YOU LOWLY
MAHAR.

STRANGELY THE WORDS DID NOT HURT
CHOKHA.

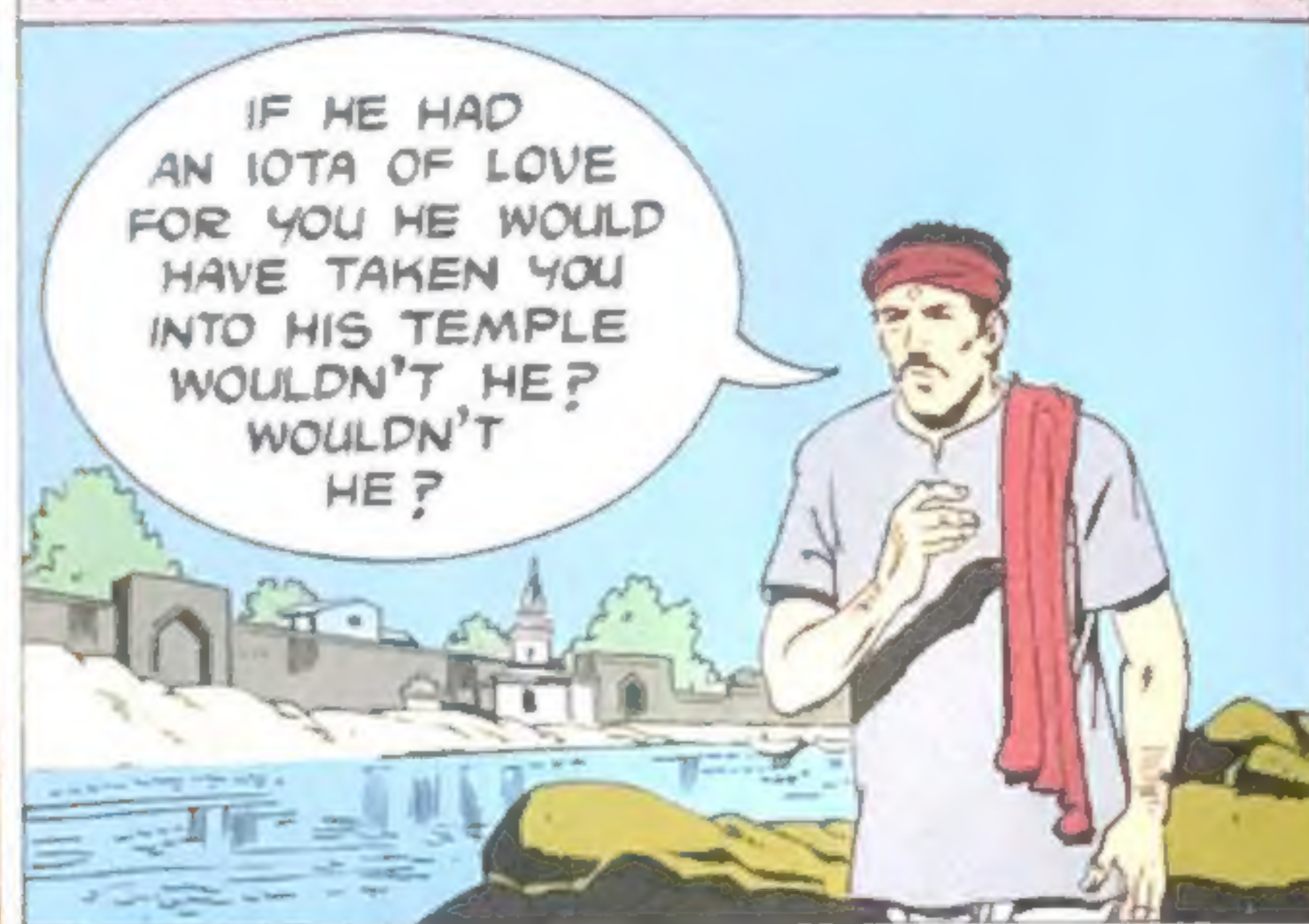




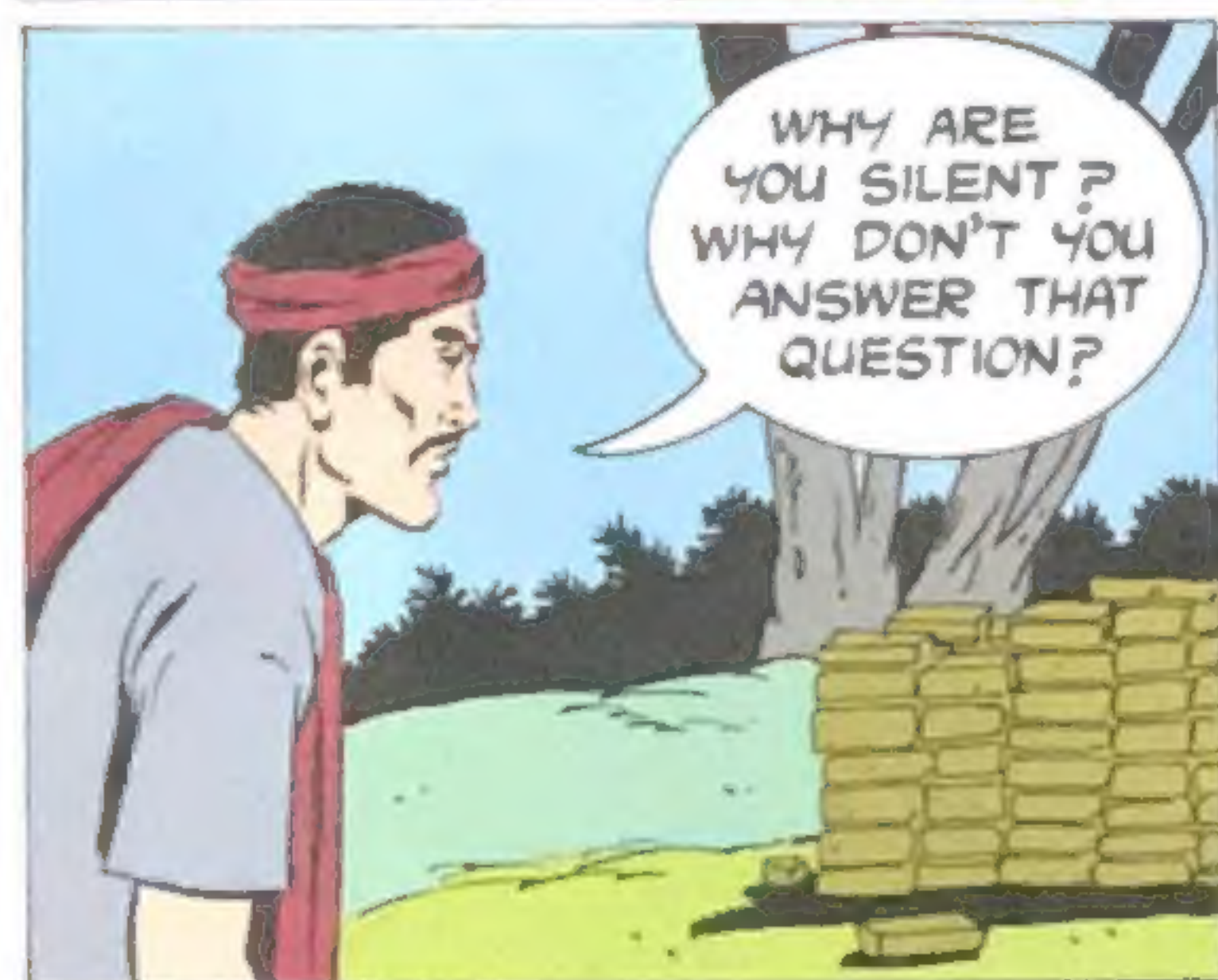
HE TRIED TO CHANT THE LORD'S NAME...



...BUT REPEATED THE PRIEST'S WORDS INSTEAD.



IF HE HAD AN IOTA OF LOVE FOR YOU HE WOULD HAVE TAKEN YOU INTO HIS TEMPLE WOULDN'T HE? WOULDN'T HE?



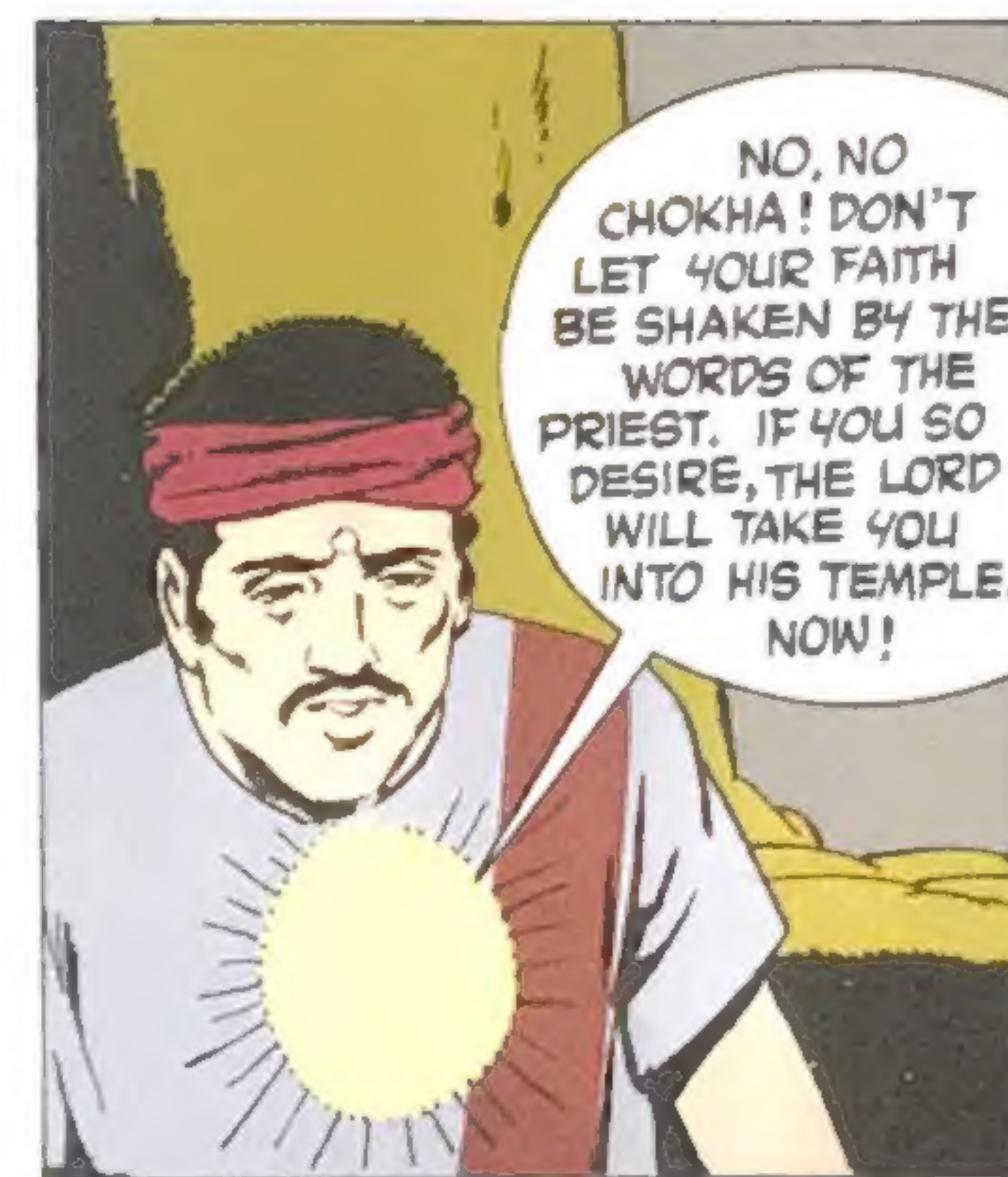
WHY ARE YOU SILENT? WHY DON'T YOU ANSWER THAT QUESTION?



WHATEVER I TRY IS A WASTE. I ONLY SUFFER IN RETURN.



WHY DO I RUN AFTER YOU?



NO, NO CHOKHA! DON'T LET YOUR FAITH BE SHAKEN BY THE WORDS OF THE PRIEST. IF YOU SO DESIRE, THE LORD WILL TAKE YOU INTO HIS TEMPLE. NOW!



IT WAS THE CHANTING OF HIS NAME THAT GAVE YOU PEACE, REMEMBER!



WHAT PEACE? PEACE THAT COULD BE TAKEN AWAY BY ANY PRIEST?



NO! A PEACE BECAUSE OF WHICH I AM WITH YOU, CHOKHA. COME TO ME. NOW IF YOU WILL.

CHOKHA ROSE AND...



...FOUND HIMSELF WALKING TOWARDS THE TEMPLE.



IN THE DARK NIGHT HOWEVER, HE STOOD ROOTED TO THE GROUND OUTSIDE THE MAIN GATE, THE LIMITS MAN HAD SET FOR HIM.



ENTER, CHOKHA. ENTER. WHY DO YOU HESITATE? HAVE YOU NO FAITH IN ME?



BUT I'LL POLLUTE YOU. I AM A MAHAR.

IF I COULD BE POLLUTED BY YOU, I WOULDN'T BE GOD. WHY, I WOULDN'T HAVE GIVEN YOU LIFE AND THE POWER OF YEARNING FOR ME!



CHOKHA FELT HIMSELF BEING DRAWN TO THE SANCTUM SANCTORUM.



OPEN THE DOOR! COME ON! OPEN IT! YOUR FAITH HAS BROUGHT YOU THUS FAR. DRAW THE LATCH AND FLING THE DOORS OPEN.

HIS HANDS PULLED AWAY THE BOLT...



...AND HE WAS INSIDE.

COME, CHOKHA COME...



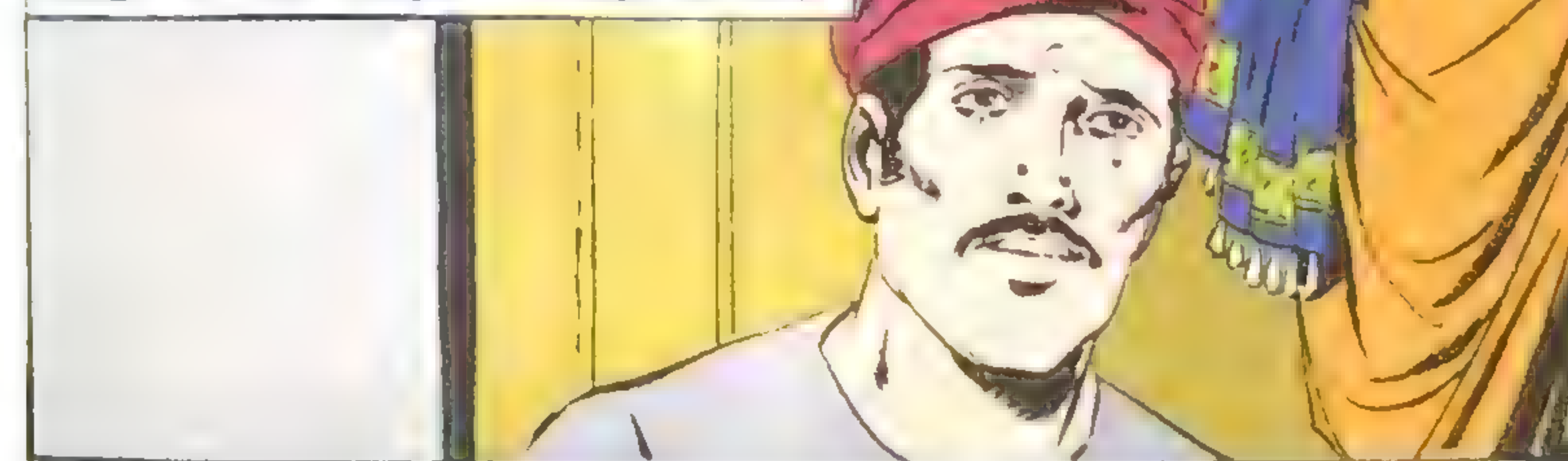
HE RAN UP TO THE IDOL...

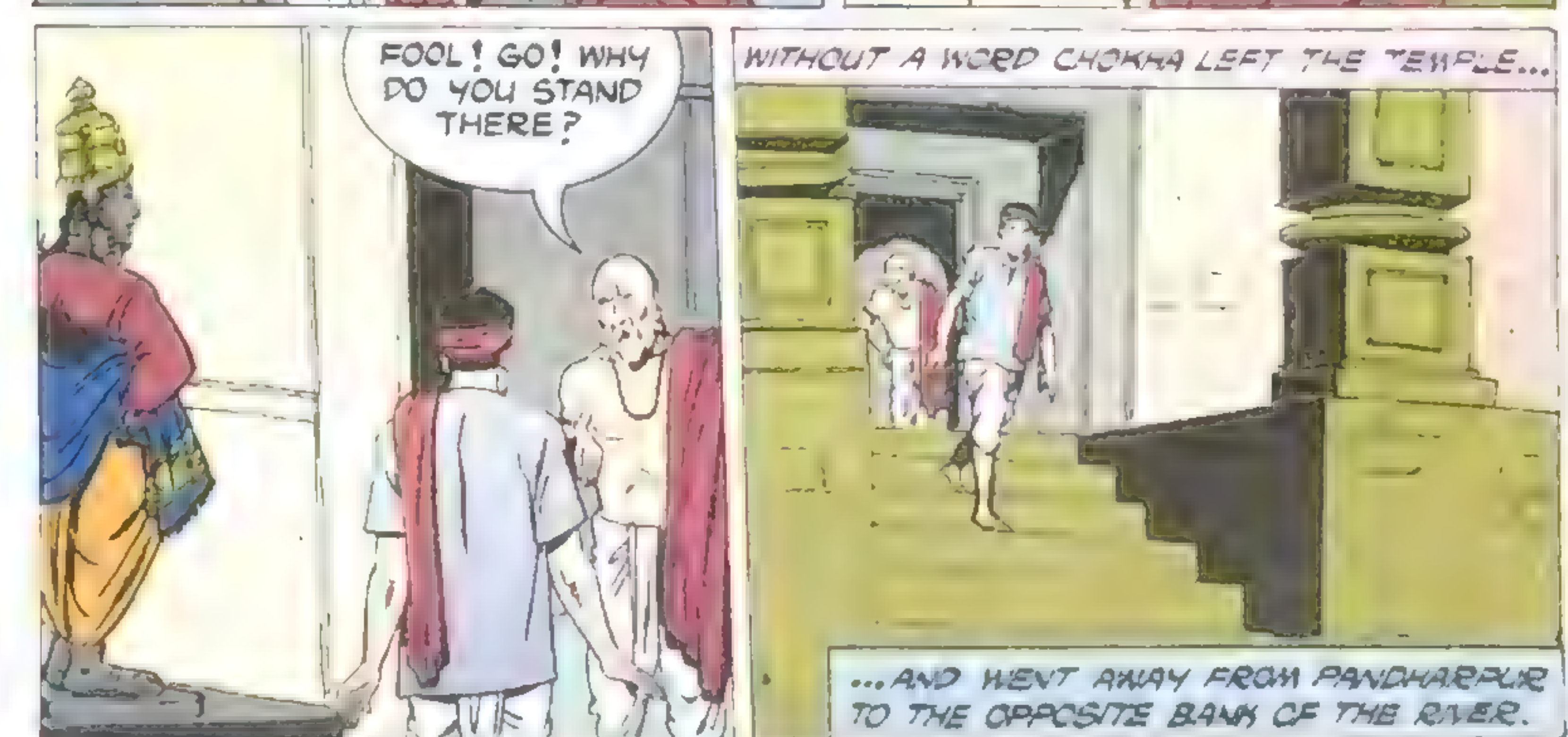
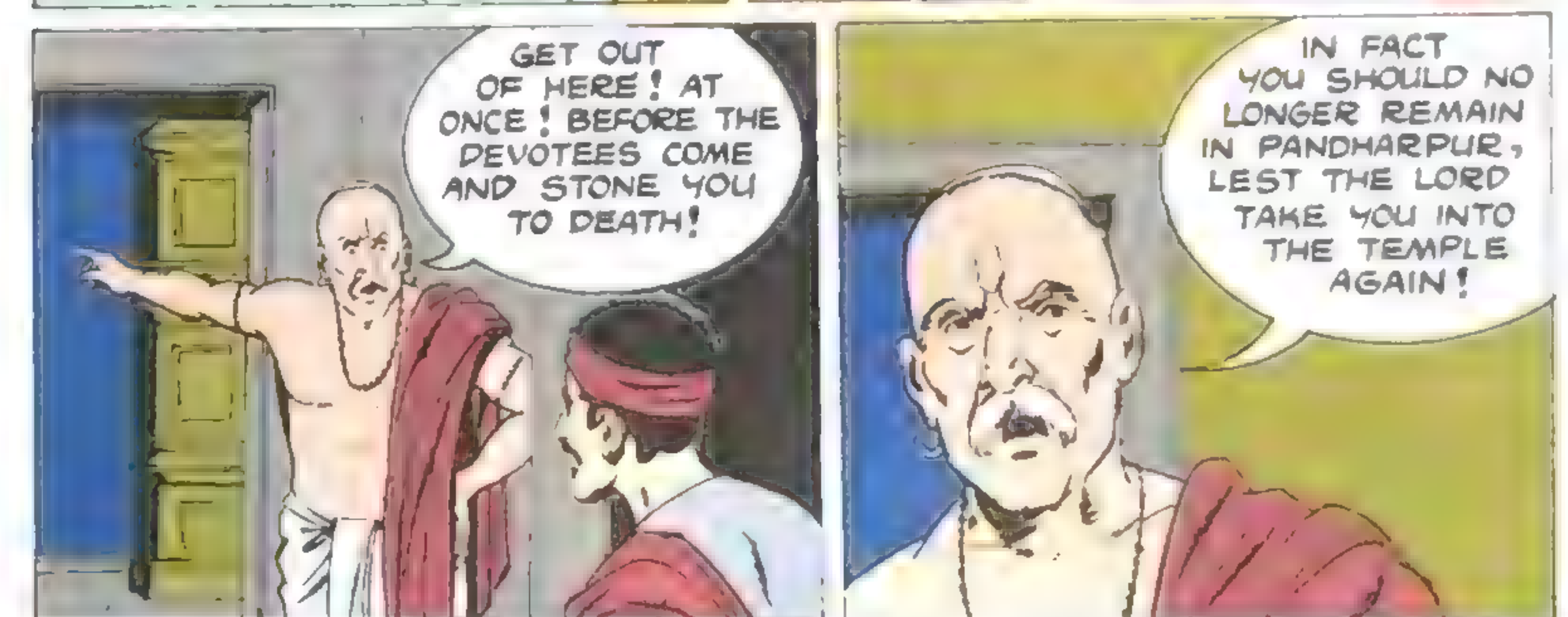
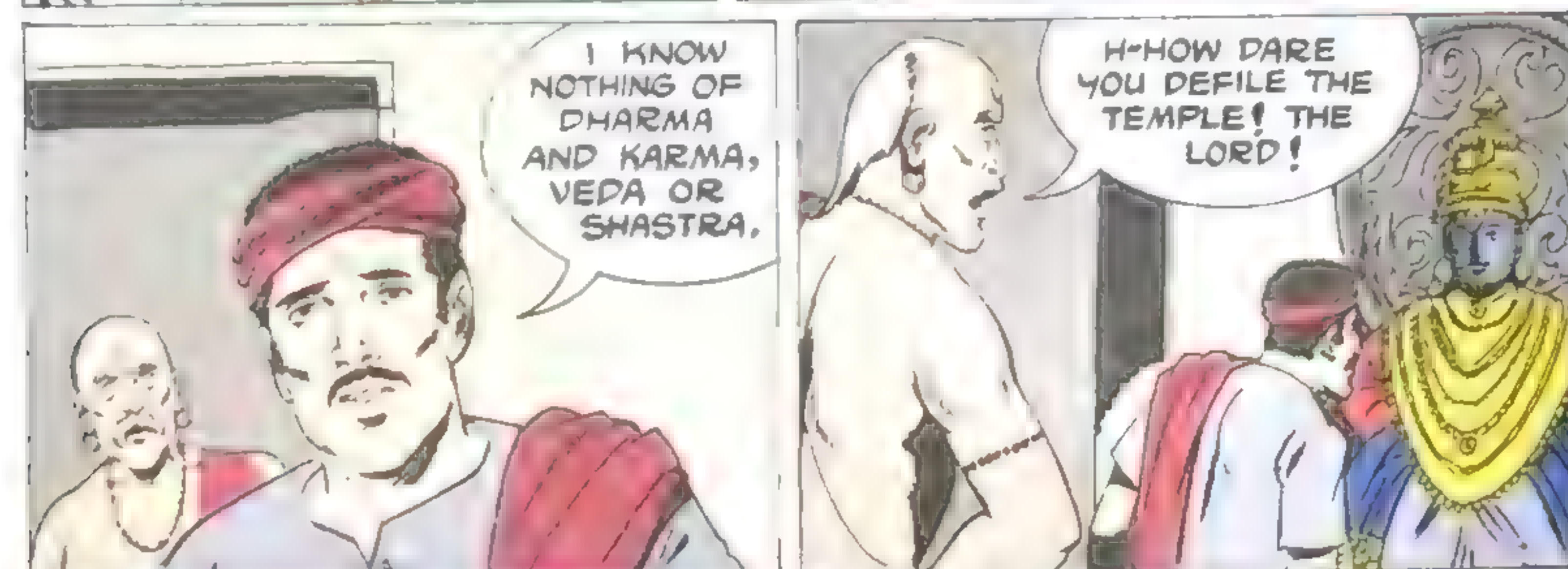
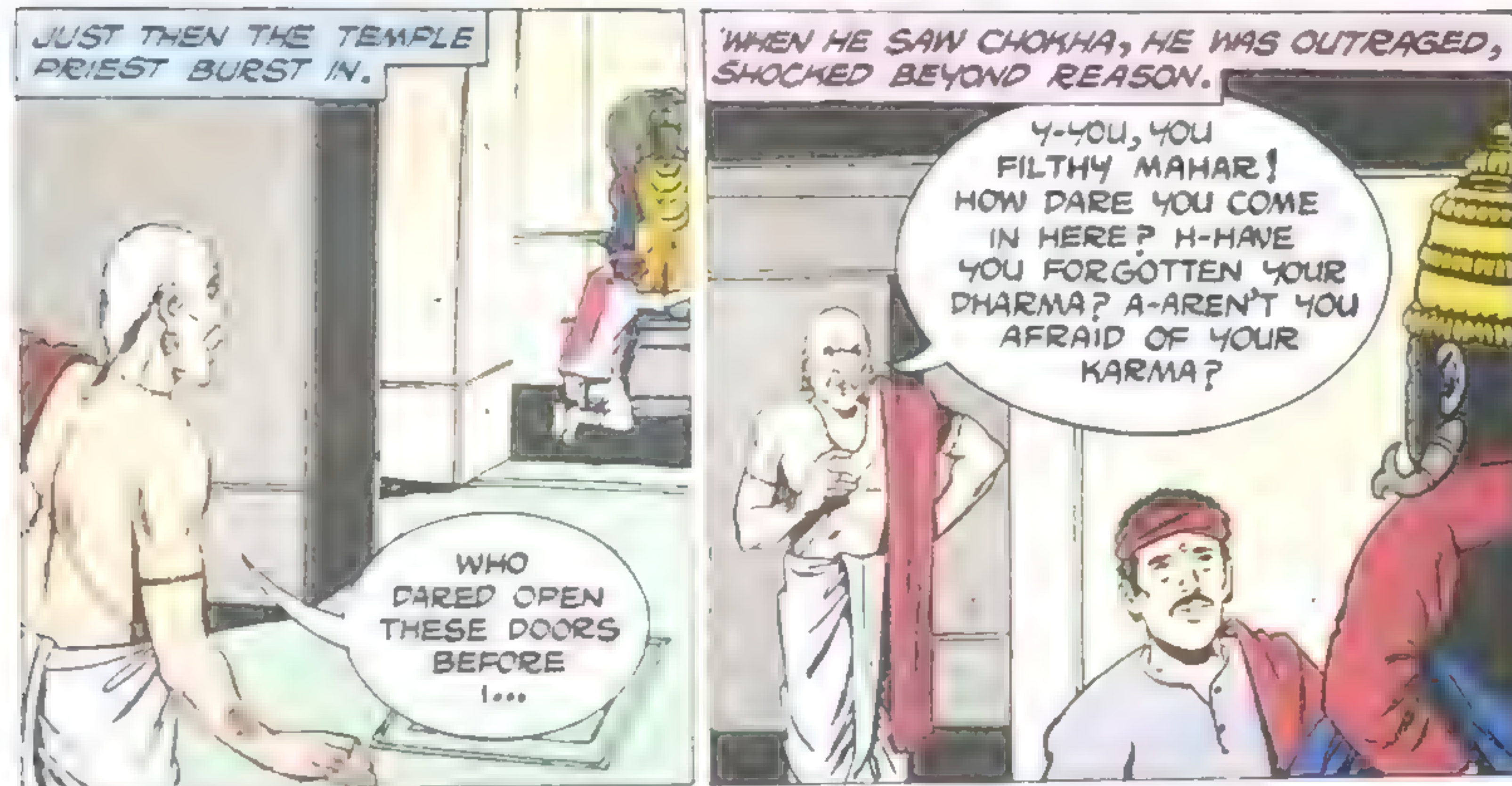


...AND HUGGING IT, FELL IN A SWOON.

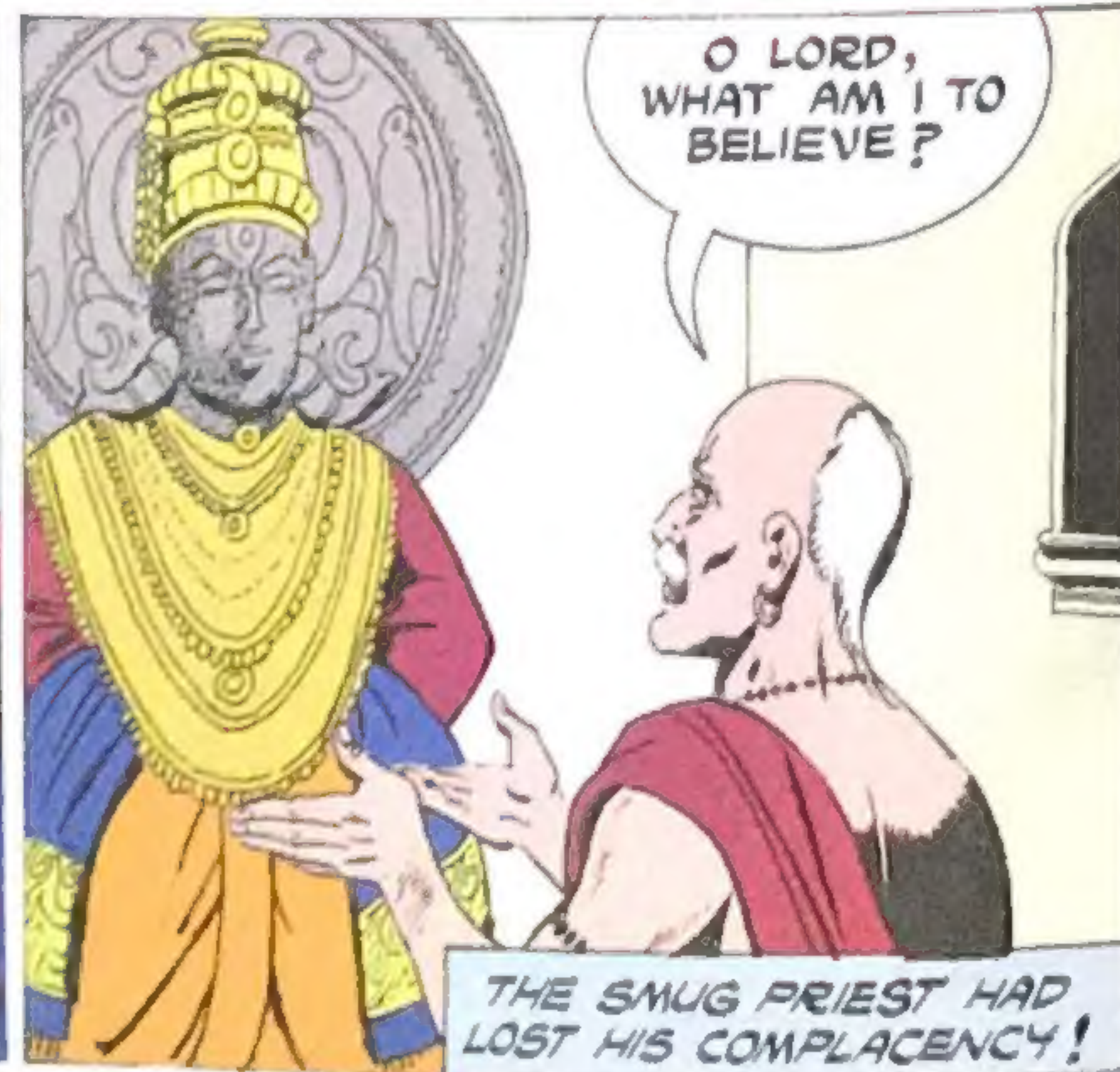
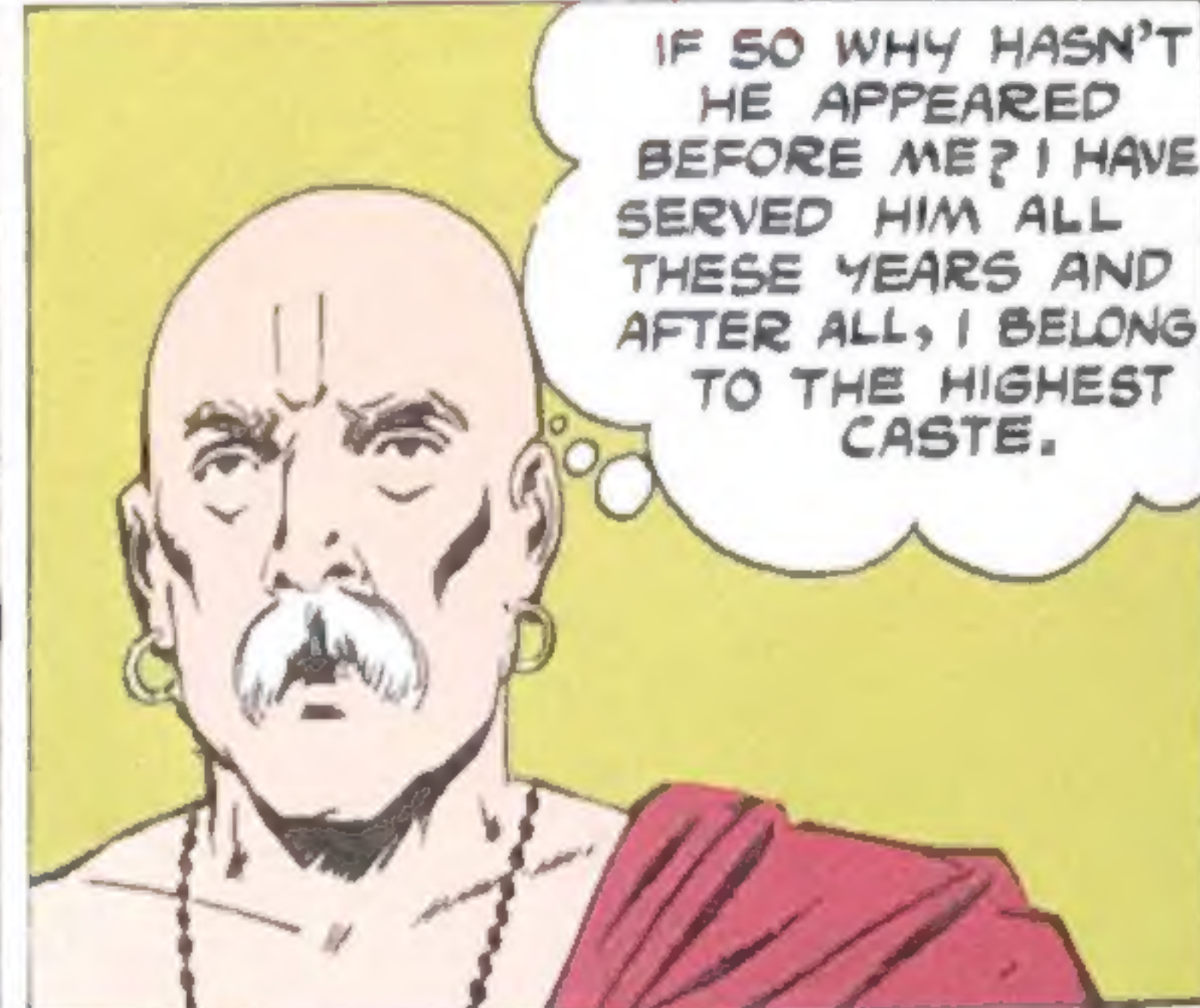
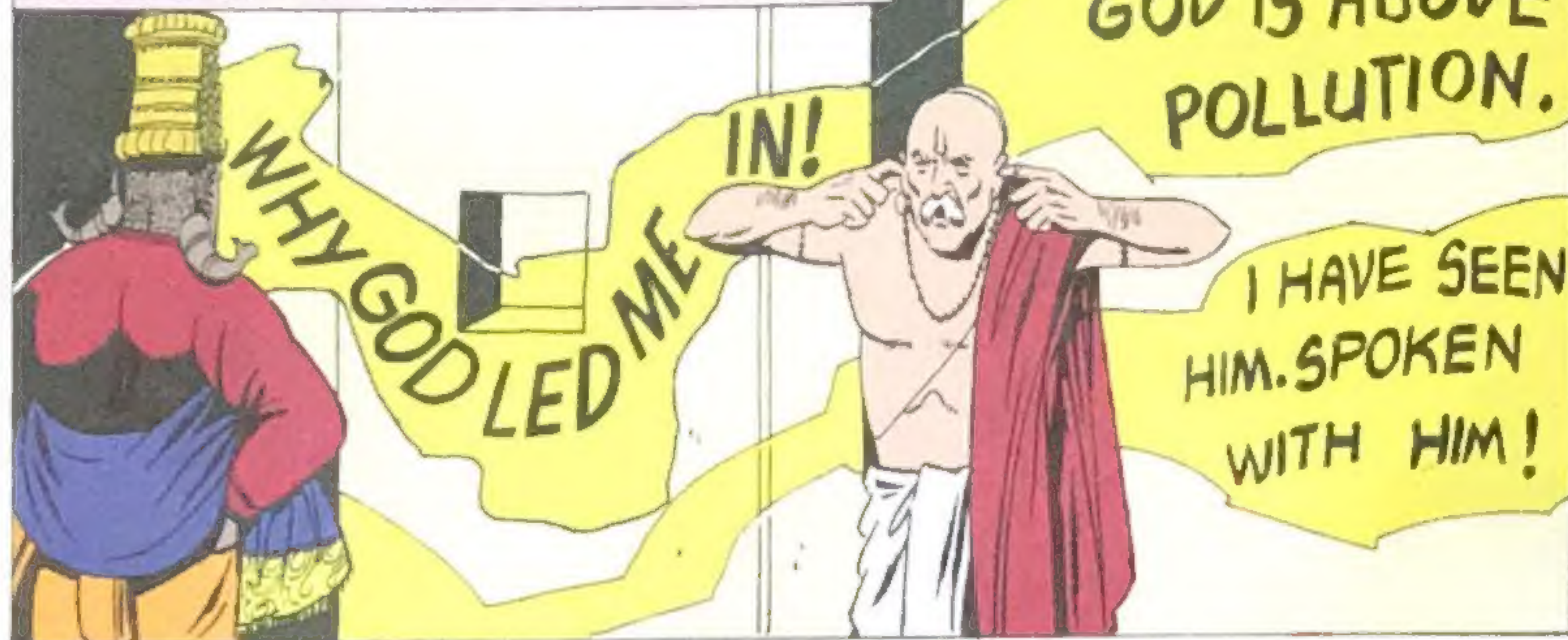


WHEN CHOKHA CAME TO, IT WAS MORNING. IT DID NOT SURPRISE OR SHOCK HIM IN THE LEAST TO FIND HIMSELF WHERE HE WAS.





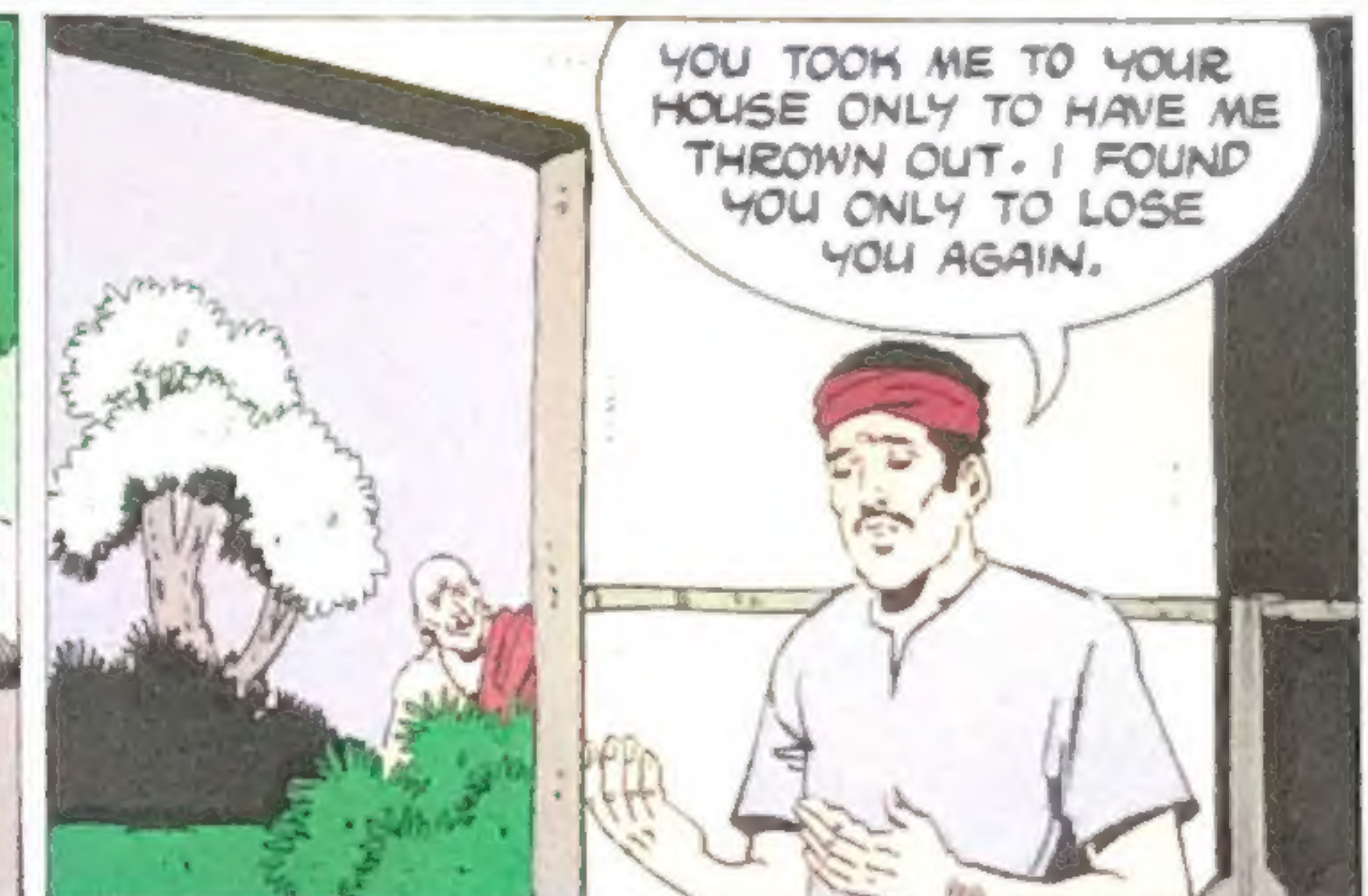
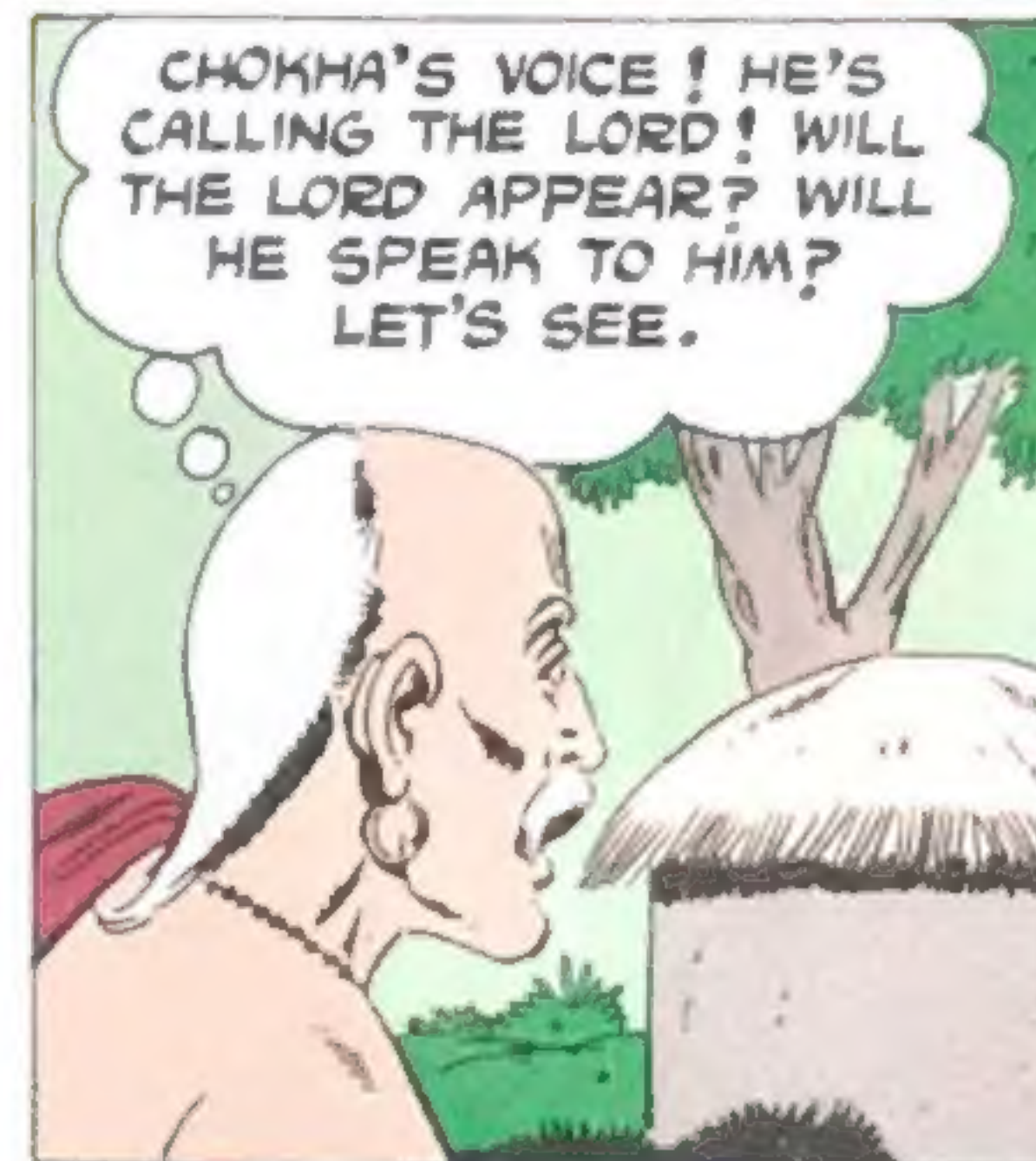
MEANWHILE THE PRIEST, EVEN THOUGH HE HAD EXILED CHOKHA, COULD NOT FORGET HIM, HIS WORDS, THE EPISODE IN THE TEMPLE.

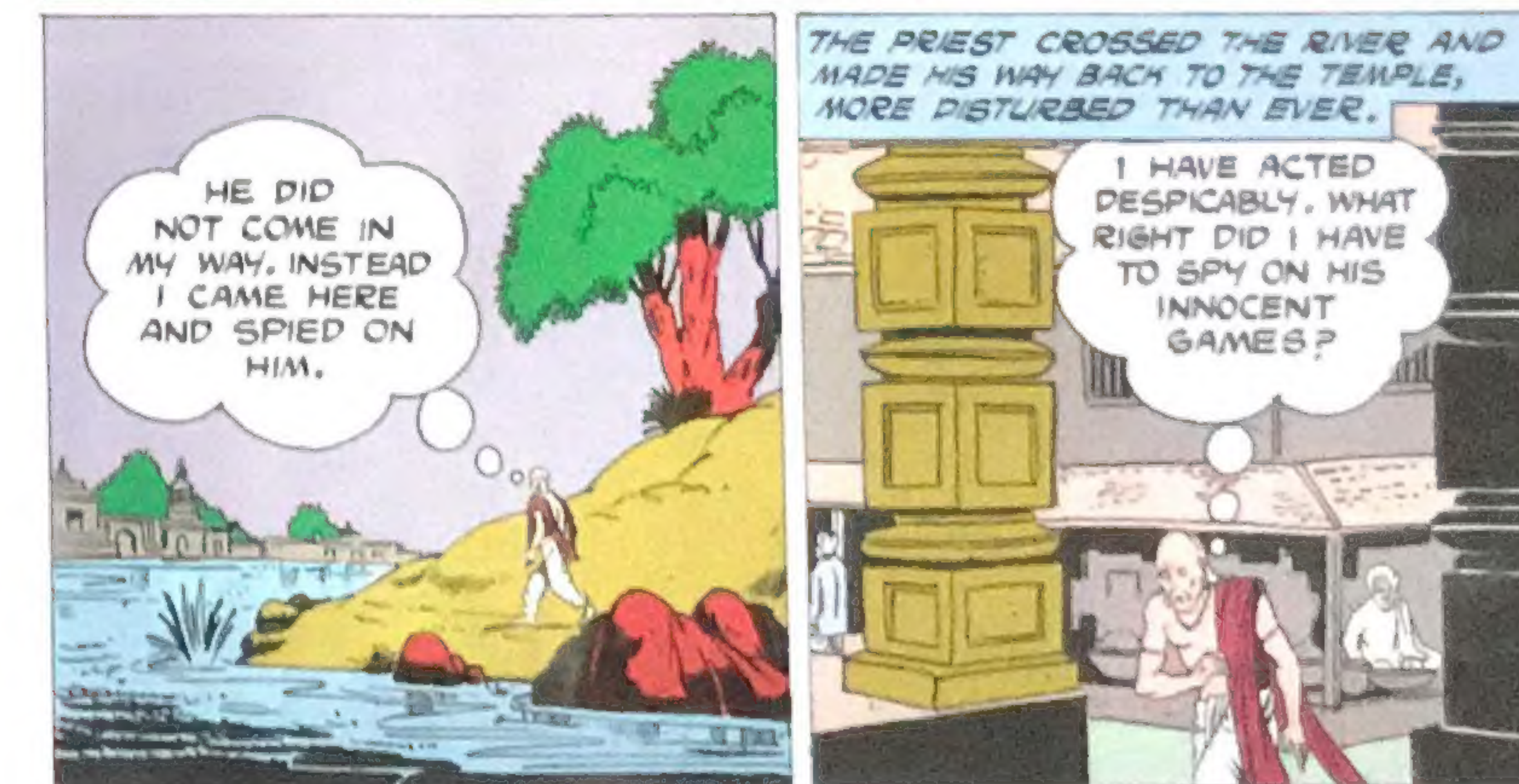
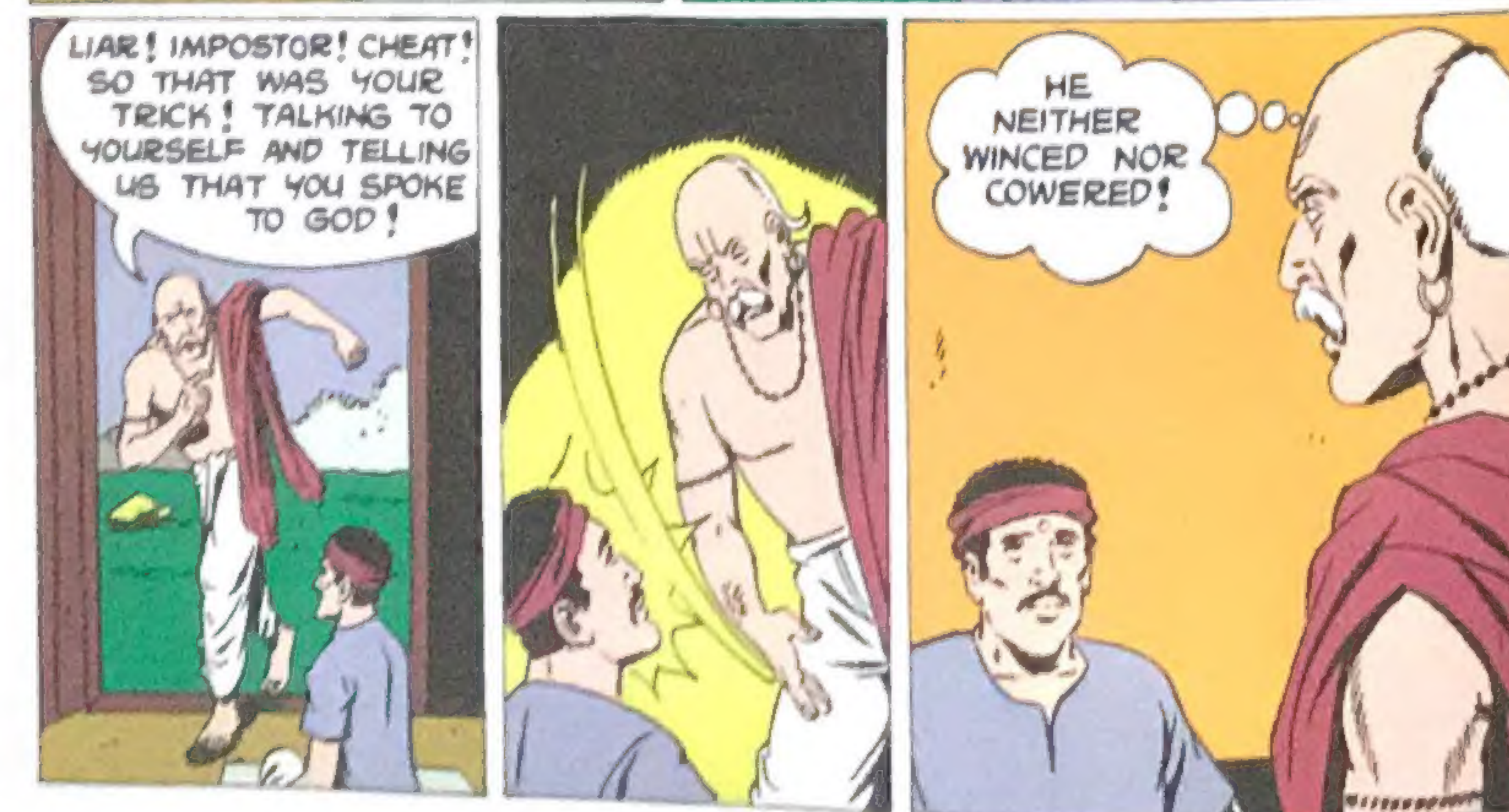
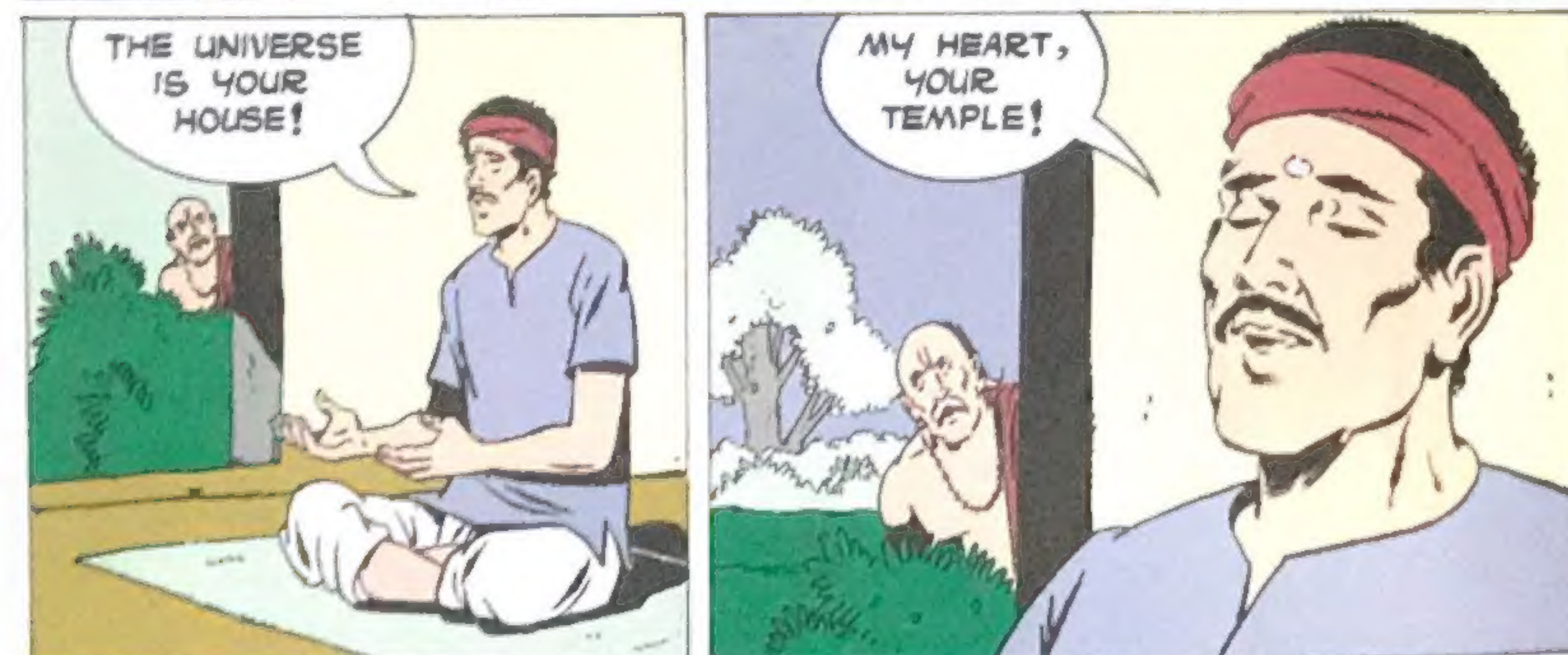
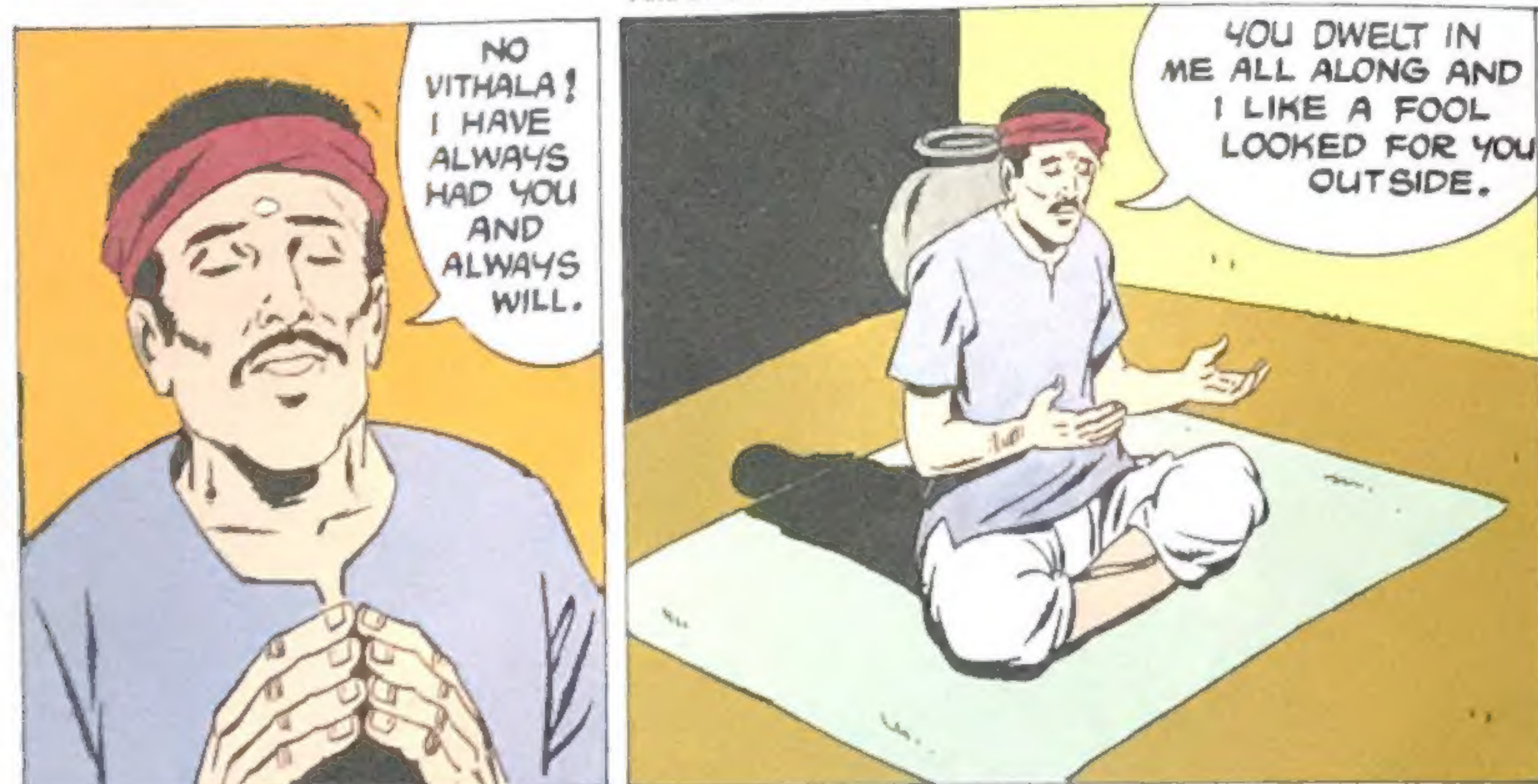


HE WAS RACKED BY DOUBTS. HE COULD NOT CONCENTRATE ON HIS DUTIES IN THE TEMPLE. AT LAST ONE DAY—

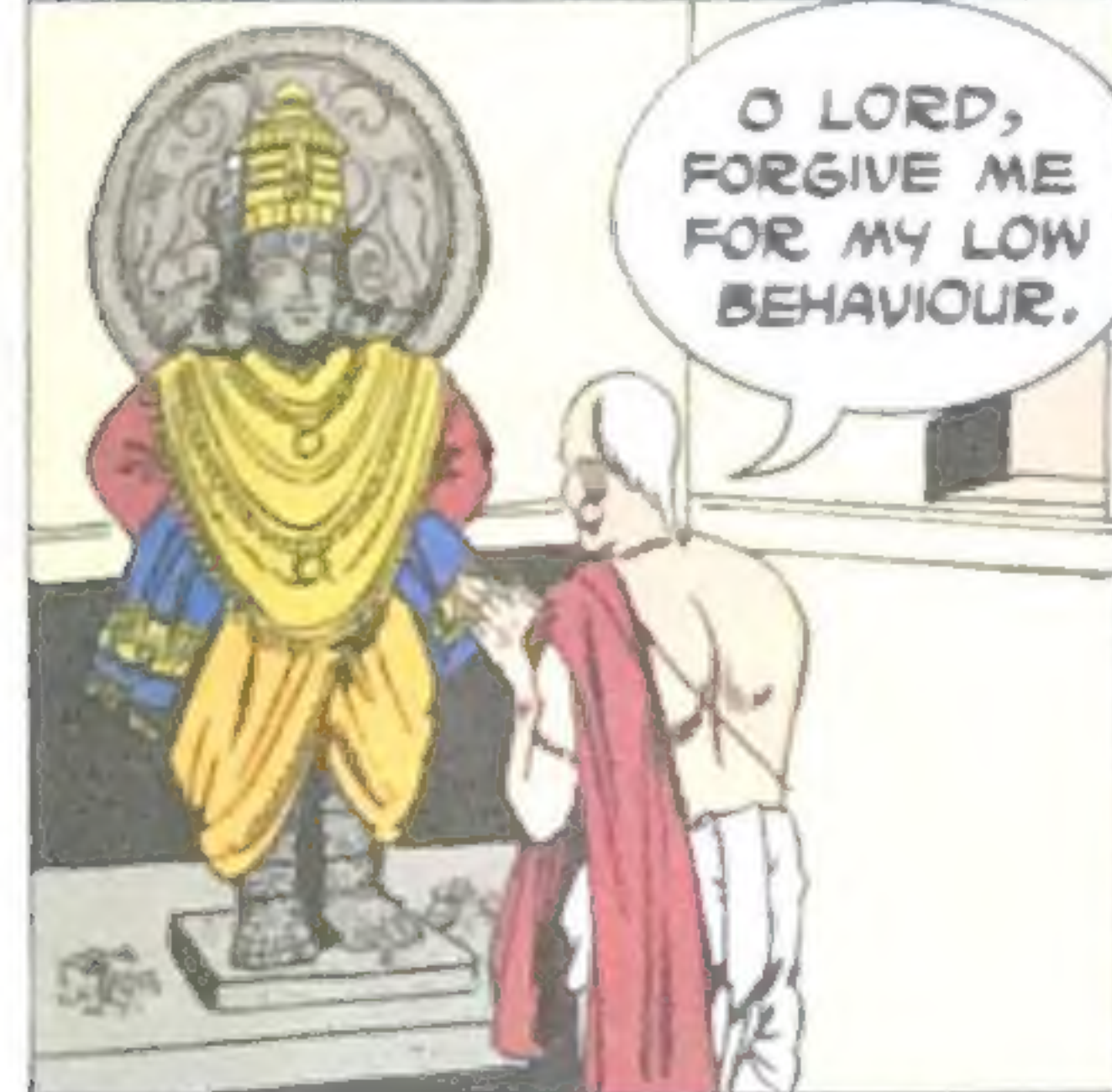


AS HE APPROACHED CHOKHA'S HUT ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RIVER—





HE ENTERED THE SANCTUM SANCTORUM AND CLOSED HIS EYES.



O LORD, FORGIVE ME FOR MY LOW BEHAVIOUR.

THEN HE OPENED HIS EYES AND GAZED UPON THE FACE OF THE IDOL. FOR THE FIRST TIME HE REALLY SAW THE DEITY.



THAT SMILE! THE MAHAR'S SMILE! THE SAME...

THEN HIS GAZE FELL ON A CHEEK OF THE IDOL. WAS HE IMAGINING THINGS?



HE RUBBED HIS EYES... AND LOOKED AGAIN.



IT IS SWOLLEN! UNMISTAKABLY SWOLLEN!



THE MAHAR... I HIT THE MAHAR ON HIS CHEEK.



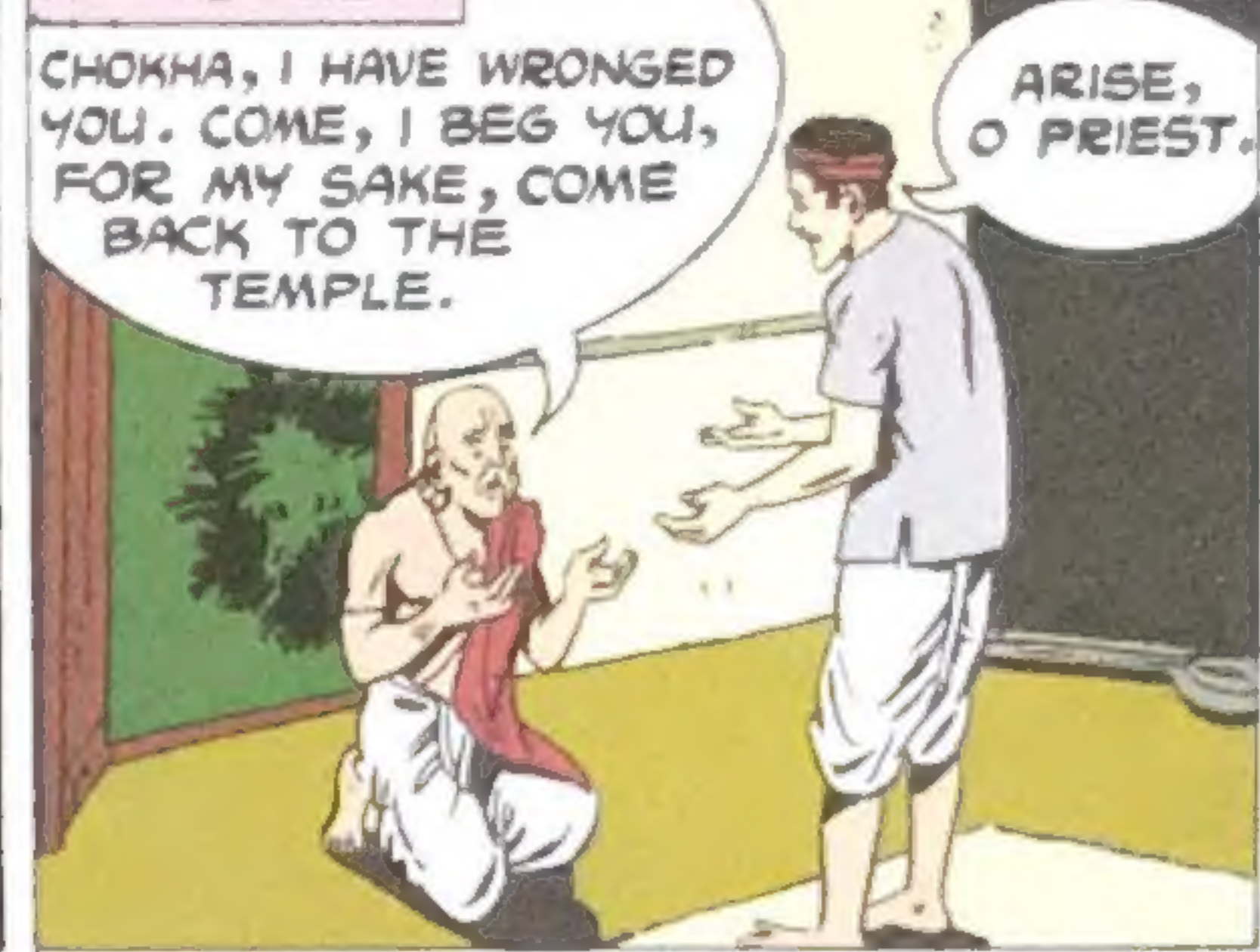
O GOD, FORGIVE ME! CHOKHA, FORGIVE ME. WHAT A FOOL! WHAT AN IGNORANT FOOL I HAVE BEEN! OH, WHAT A SINNER!

WHEN HE ROSE FROM THE FOOT OF THE IDOL, HE WAS A DIFFERENT MAN.



BY PERSECUTING CHOKHA I HAVE PERSECUTED GOD HIMSELF.

FULL OF REMORSE HE WENT BACK ACROSS THE RIVER TO CHOKHA'S HUT AND FELL AT HIS FEET.



CHOKHA, I HAVE WRONGED YOU. COME, I BEG YOU, FOR MY SAKE, COME BACK TO THE TEMPLE.

ARISE, O PRIEST.

CHOKHA WENT WITH THE PRIEST AND WHEN THEY ENTERED THE SANCTUM—



LOOK! SEE WHAT I HAVE DONE TO THE LORD. TO HIS CHEEK...



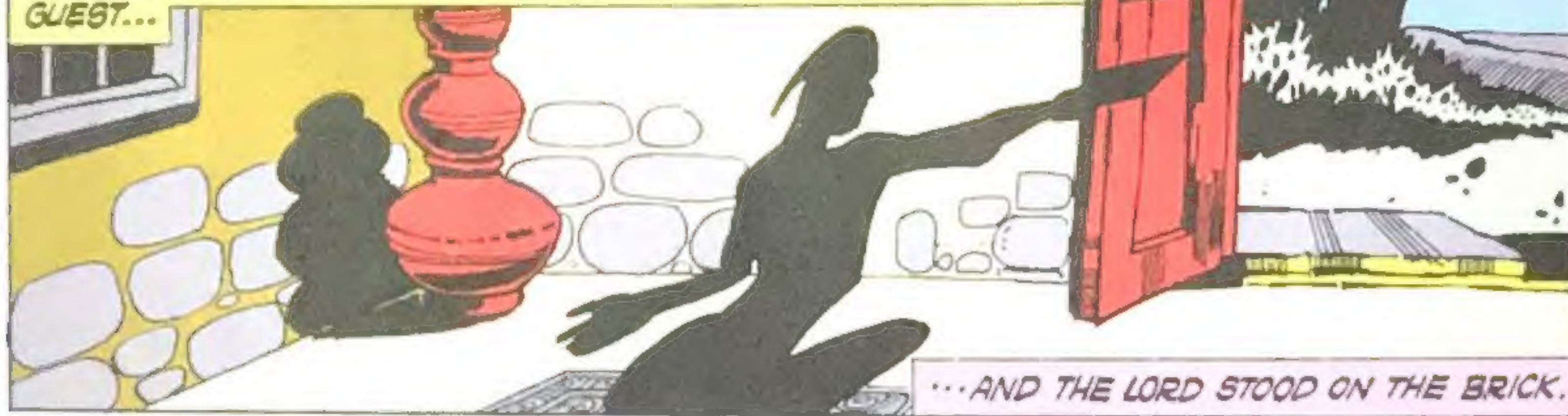
THE SWELLING HAS GONE! I AM FORGIVEN!

CHOKHA STAYED ON AT PANDHARPUR, COMPOSING ABHANGS ON HIS EXPERIENCES IN THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH, FOR GOD. HIS ABHANGS ARE SUNG TO THIS DAY IN MAHARASHTRA.



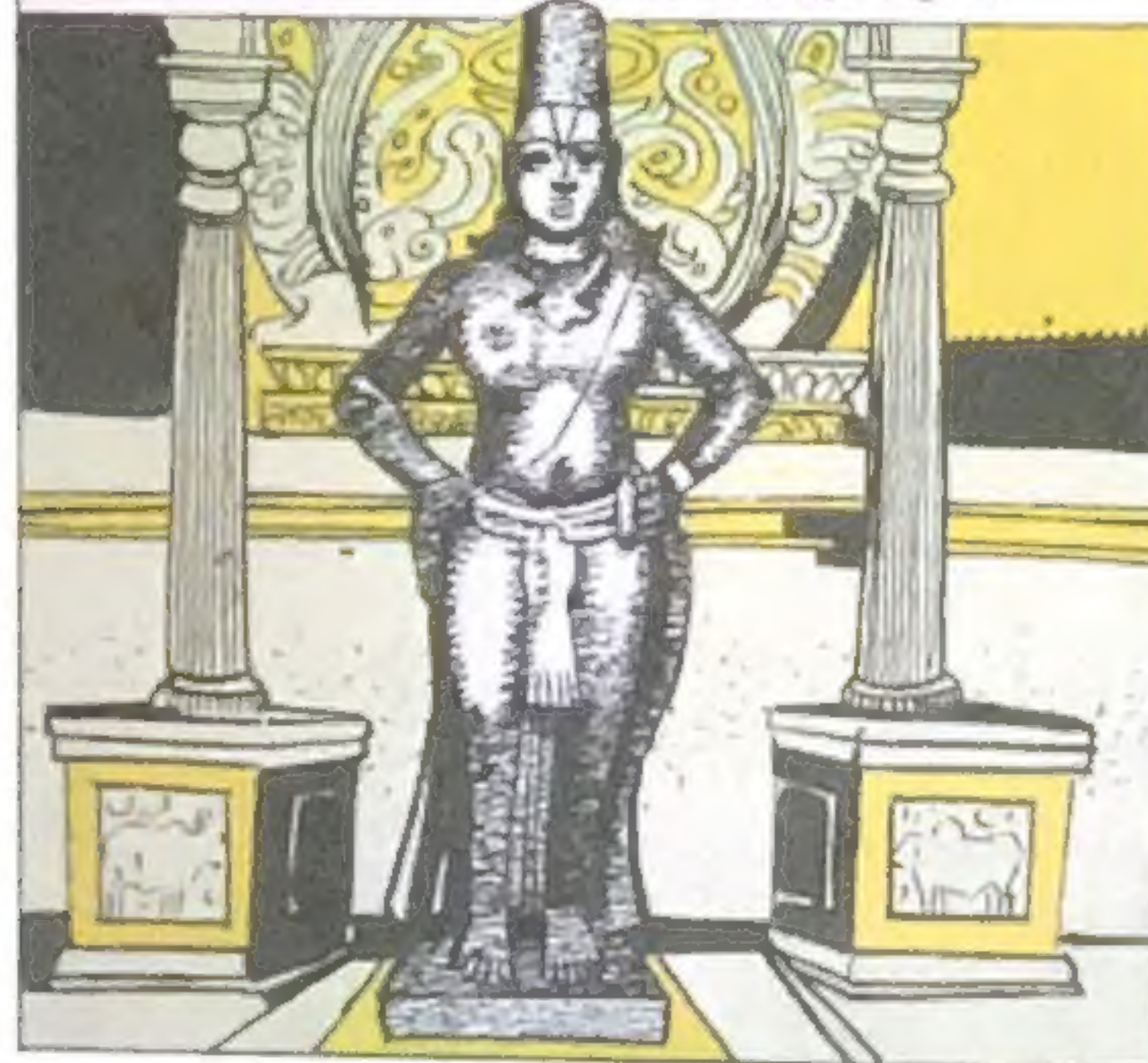
PANDHARPUR

WHEN PANDURANGA CAME TO HIM, PUNDALIKA, HIS DEVOTEE, WAS BUSY LOOKING AFTER HIS AGED PARENTS. HE PUSHED A BRICK TOWARDS THE LORD— THE ONLY SEAT HE COULD OFFER TO THE GUEST...

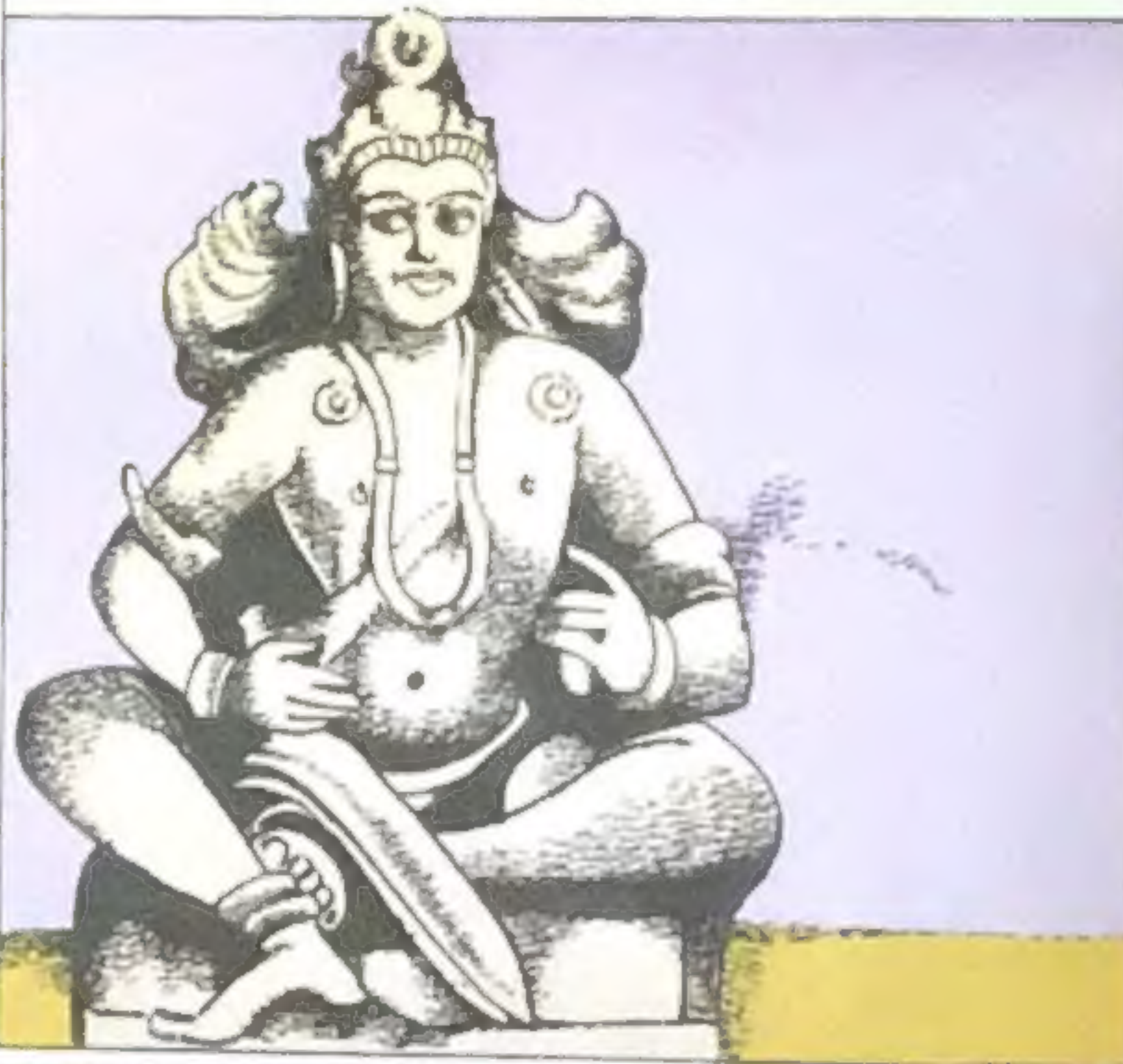


...AND THE LORD STOOD ON THE BRICK.

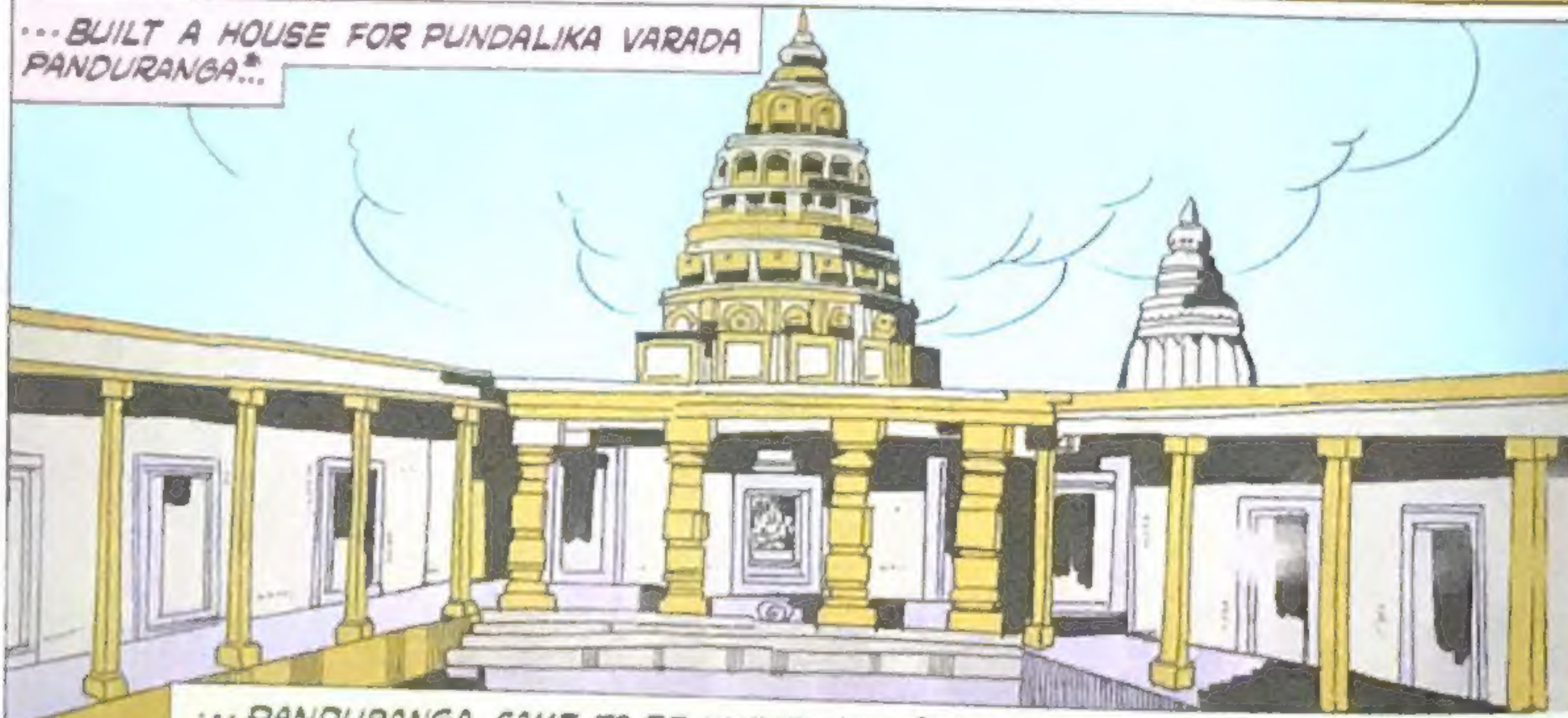
IT IS IN THIS CLASSIC POSTURE THAT WE FIND THE IMAGE OF PANDURANGA TODAY, IN THE TEMPLE OF PANDHARPUR ON THE BANK OF THE RIVER CHANDRABHAGA.



WHEN BITTIDEVA VISHNUVARDHANA, THE HOYSALA KING FROM KARNATAKA...



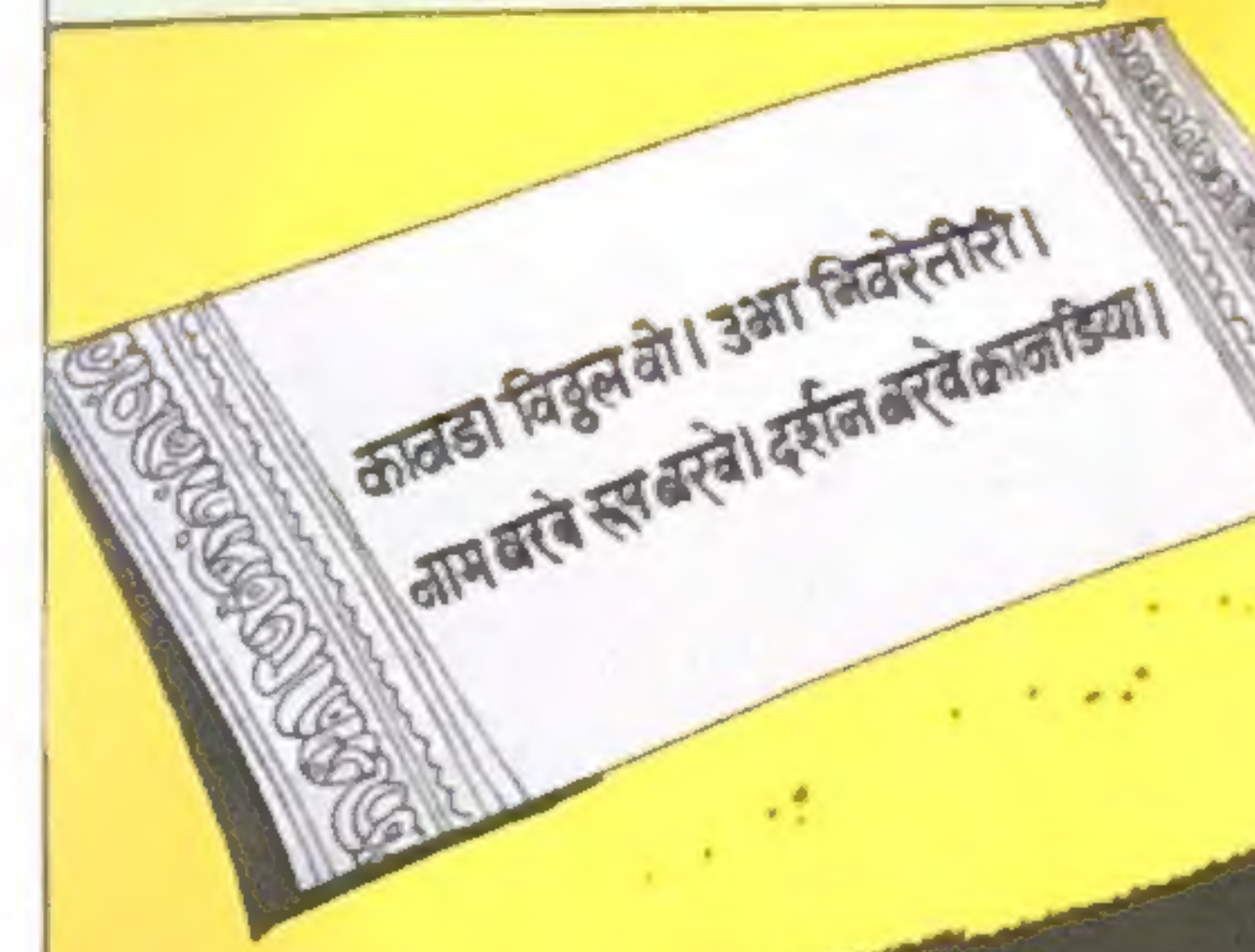
...BUILT A HOUSE FOR PUNDALIKA VARADA PANDURANGA...



...PANDURANGA CAME TO BE KNOWN AS VITHALA— A DERIVATIVE OF BITTIDEVA.

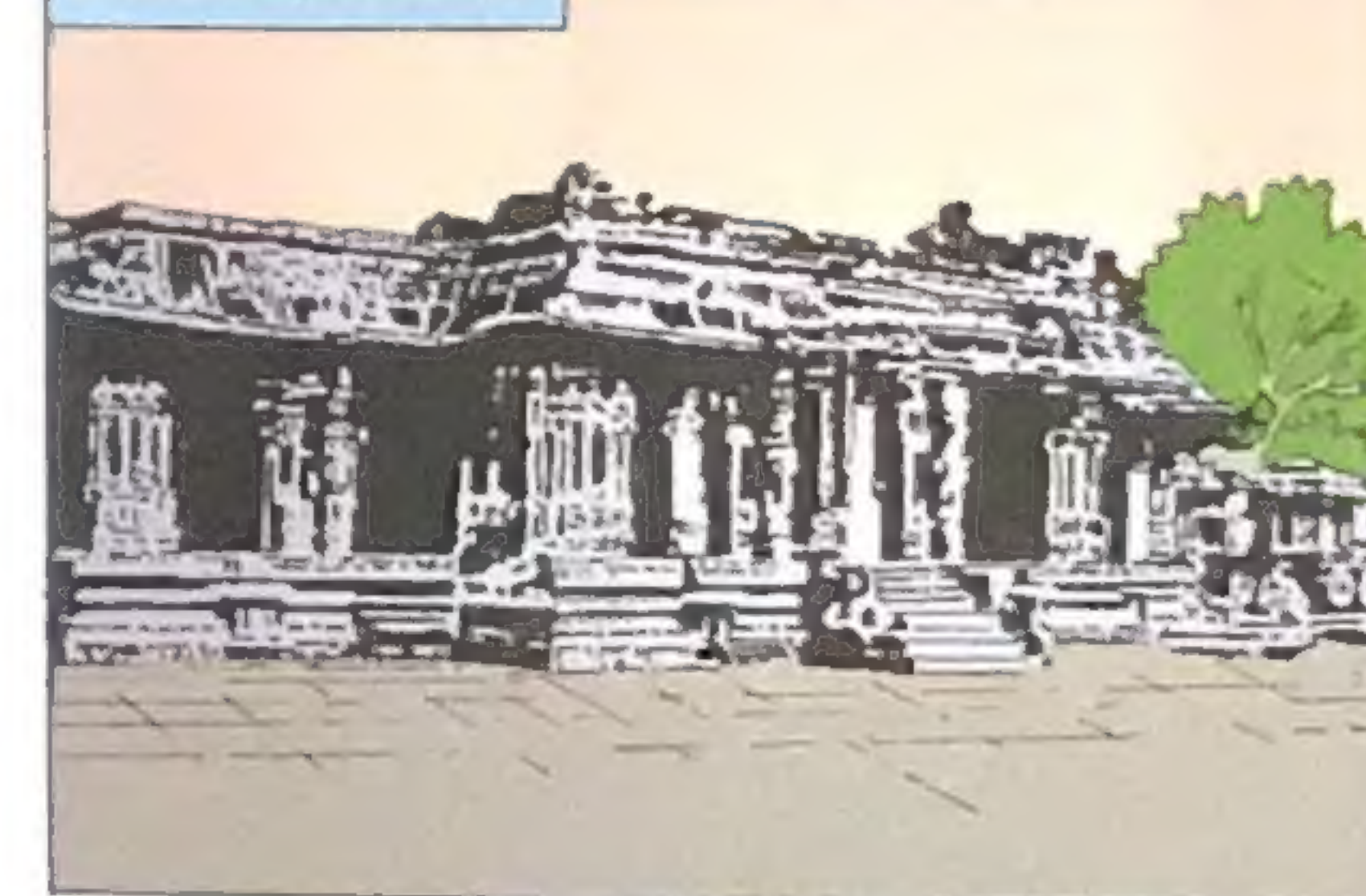
* PANDURANGA, WHO BLESSED PUNDALIKA

LATER, SANT NAMADEVA SANG—

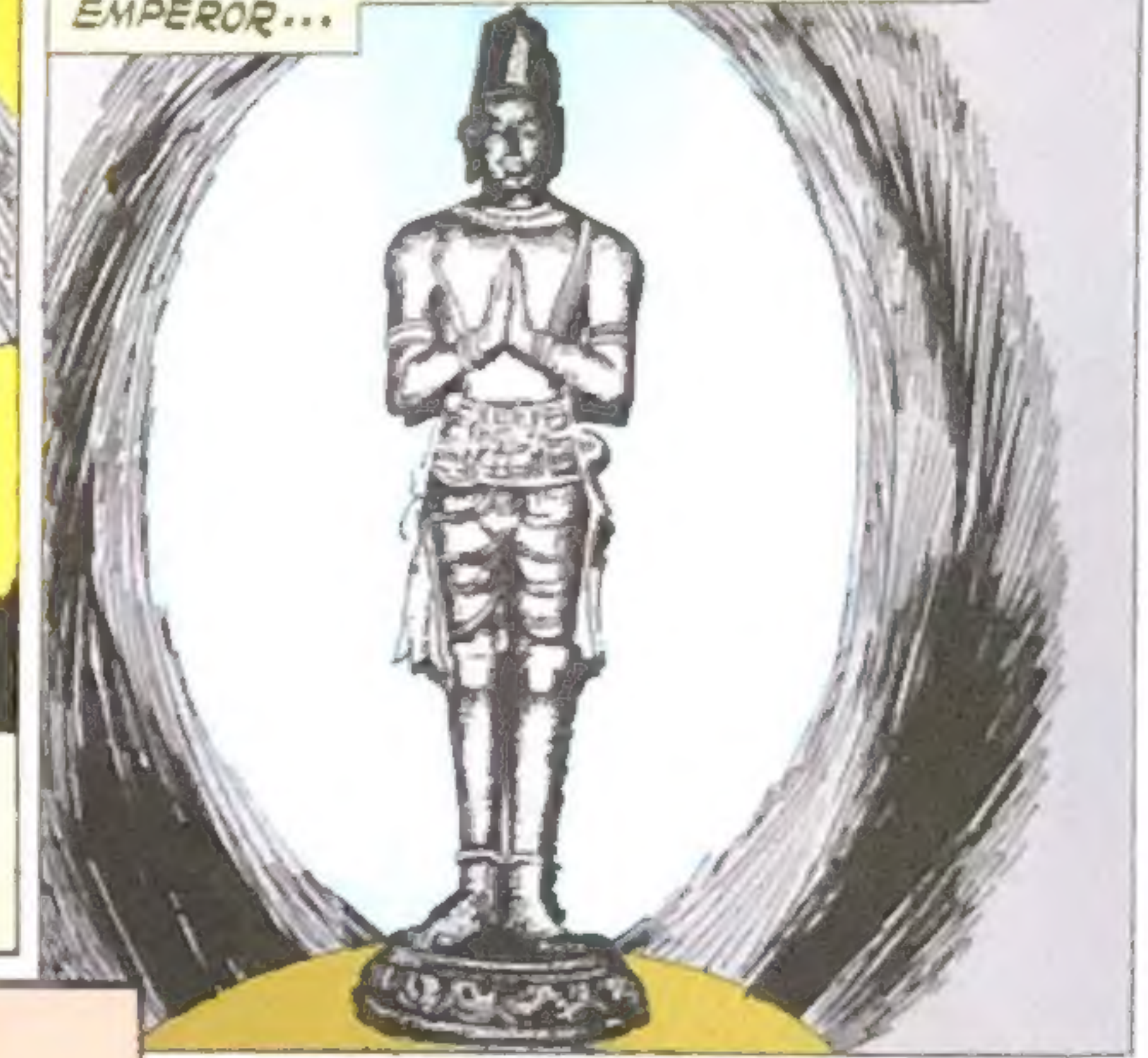


"THE KANADA VITHALA IS STANDING ON THE BANKS OF BHIVARA (BHIMA). THE 'DARSHAN' OF THE 'KANADIA' IS GOOD, HIS LOOKS ARE PLEASING."

...TOOK VITHALA AWAY TO HIS OWN CAPITAL, HAMPI.



HIS LOOKS WERE SO PLEASING THAT KRISHNADEVA RAYA, THE VIJAYANAGARA EMPEROR...

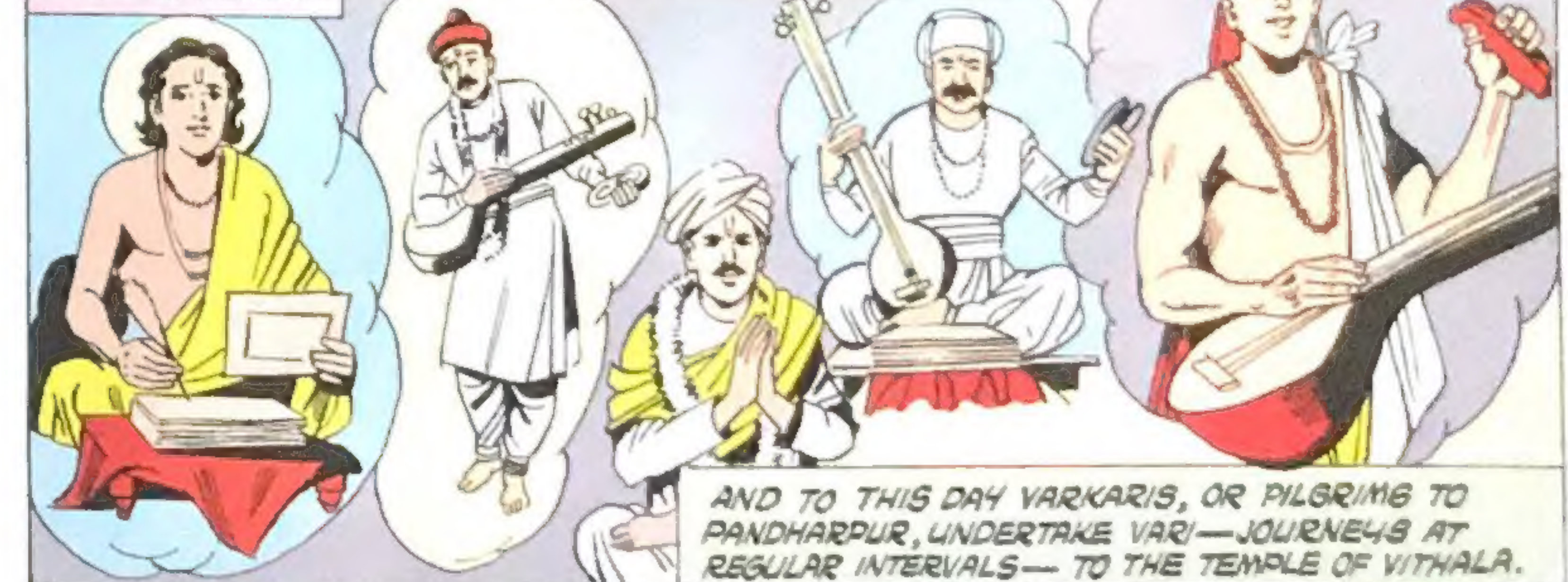


BUT SOME 'VARKARIS' LED BY BHANUDAS WALKED TO HAMPI SINGING THE PRAISES OF THE LORD...



...AND BROUGHT HIM BACK HOME.

JINANESHWAR, NAMADEVA, EKANATH, TUKARAM, PURANDARA DASA AND MANY OTHER SAINTS FROM MAHARASHTRA AND KARNATAKA LOOKED TO PUNDALIKA-VITHALA-PANDURANGA-VITHALA— FOR INSPIRATION.



AND TO THIS DAY VARKARIS, OR PILGRIMS TO PANDHARPUR, UNDERTAKE VARI—JOURNEYS AT REGULAR INTERVALS— TO THE TEMPLE OF VITHALA.